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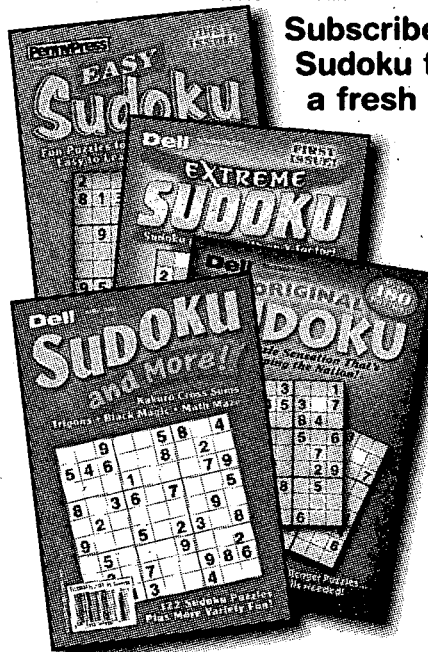


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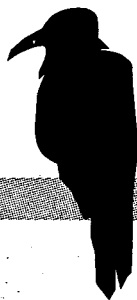
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GUEST EDITORIAL

PETER SCHULMAN

ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND FRANCE: A LOVE AFFAIR

As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine this year, we take this opportunity to explore a little-discussed aspect of the work of our famous namesake. As our guest editorialist, Peter Schulman, demonstrates, the Master had a long and mutually satisfying relationship with France and the French. An associate professor of French and International Studies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, Mr. Schulman studies French cinema, and here he looks at the great director's French connection.—ED.

"Grandfather had a deep affection for the French and the French for him, even as an auteur director as opposed to just a commercial director," Alfred Hitchcock's granddaughter, Mary Stone, reflects in the DVD to perhaps Hitchcock's most loving portrayal of France, the 1955 classic *To Catch a Thief*. "France was one of the places [my grandparents] always loved, and that is why it was so strong in the movie," Stone concludes. Indeed, Hitchcock and France have had a long and wonderful relationship, from Hitchcock's earliest days of filmmaking to the recent exhibition and retrospective of his works in Paris and Montreal in 2001, "Hitchcock et l'art." If one can enjoy the many films in which French culture and France have played a role, one can also count the many French directors and critics who have thought of Hitchcock as one of the world's greatest filmmakers at a time when he may have been underappreciated in the United States and erroneously considered just a popular craftsman. As James Vest writes in *Alfred Hitchcock and France: The Making of an Auteur*: "In the late 1940s, the general view held that Hitchcock was merely an overweight, gifted technician, a master of visual tricks in the service of dubious melodramas. Among the few who dared suggest anything more positive were [the French]."

It would seem that Hitchcock never resisted an opportunity to insert a French element in his intrigues. In the early version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), for example, the black and white mysterious atmosphere is enhanced by the snowy French-speaking Swiss alpine resort (Hitchcock would enjoy taking his family for skiing trips at St. Moritz) and the enigmatic Frenchman Louis Bernier, who begins the film's adventure with his dying breath. Of course, this French motif is expanded in his 1956 remake starring James Stewart, which begins in francophone Morocco. Whereas Bernier had a comparatively curt intervention in the early version of this

film, he seems steeped in Frenchness in the later one. At one point, when Ben McKenna's son enters into a discussion with him about the French love for escargots, the boy quips: "We could use you to eat our snails [in our garden]." Moreover, as he never uses subtitles when it is spoken in his films, Hitchcock's use of French always adds a certain authenticity to his narratives. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, French is in fact used as a coded language, as Bernard speaks it in McKenna's hotel room in order to say things secretly, if not brazenly, in front of his American (and monolingual) host. "A cynical lot these French," Drayton admits when McKenna must go before the French police commissioner, "they might not believe [your story]."

Indeed, as the title of a hit French television show *Incroyable mais vrai!* ("Unbelievable but true!") declares, when Hitchcock inserts French into his films, they are not only more believable but immediately enveloped in a certain sophistication and beauty that has been savored on both sides of the Atlantic. During World War II, however, it should be noted that Hitchcock's lesser known and rarely shown short films, *Aventure Malgache* and *Bon Voyage* (1944), were labors of love that Hitchcock made in order to contribute to the Allied cause and help the French resistance in the only way he knew he could excel: by making movies. As he explains to François Truffaut in the 1966 landmark book-length interview, *Hitchcock*, "I felt the need to make a little contribution to the war effort, and I was both overweight and overage for military service. I knew that if I did nothing I'd regret it for the rest of my life; it was important for me to do something and also to get right into the atmosphere of war . . . In London my friend Sidney Bernstein was the head of the film section of the British Ministry of Information. It was at his request that I undertook two small films that were tributes to the work of the French Resistance." Although he never shot a gun, his movie shots did much to help the French during the war. Truffaut himself remembers having seen them when the tide was turning against the Germans. As Hitchcock explains: "The idea was to show them [*Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*] in parts of France where the Germans were losing ground in order to help the French people appreciate the rôle of the Resistance." In *Bon Voyage*, an RAF pilot is escorted out of France through Resistance channels. When he arrives in London, the RAF representative who debriefs him goes over his itinerary one more time and reveals to him that he was in fact being escorted by a Gestapo agent who was using the pilot to uncover the Resistance network. As Hitchcock explains to Truffaut: "Upon that startling revelation, we go through the journey across France all over again, but this time we show all sorts of details that the young RAF man hadn't noticed at first."

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PANDORA'S LUCK

GILBERT M. STACK

The keg burst when the redheaded beauty entered the Denver Emporium.

It was just a coincidence. The bartender was setting the tap, and perhaps he used a bit too much force. Or alternately, the wood may have been weakened by age and by use so that just at the moment she entered, the seams split and that new Coors beer gushed out onto the floor. A broken old miner who hadn't seen a town since 1872 dropped to his knees and started lapping like a dog, while the cowhands at the bar jumped up on their stools to keep the beer off their boots. As for the rest of the Emporium, they all turned to laugh and point, while the owner howled in dismay at his losses.

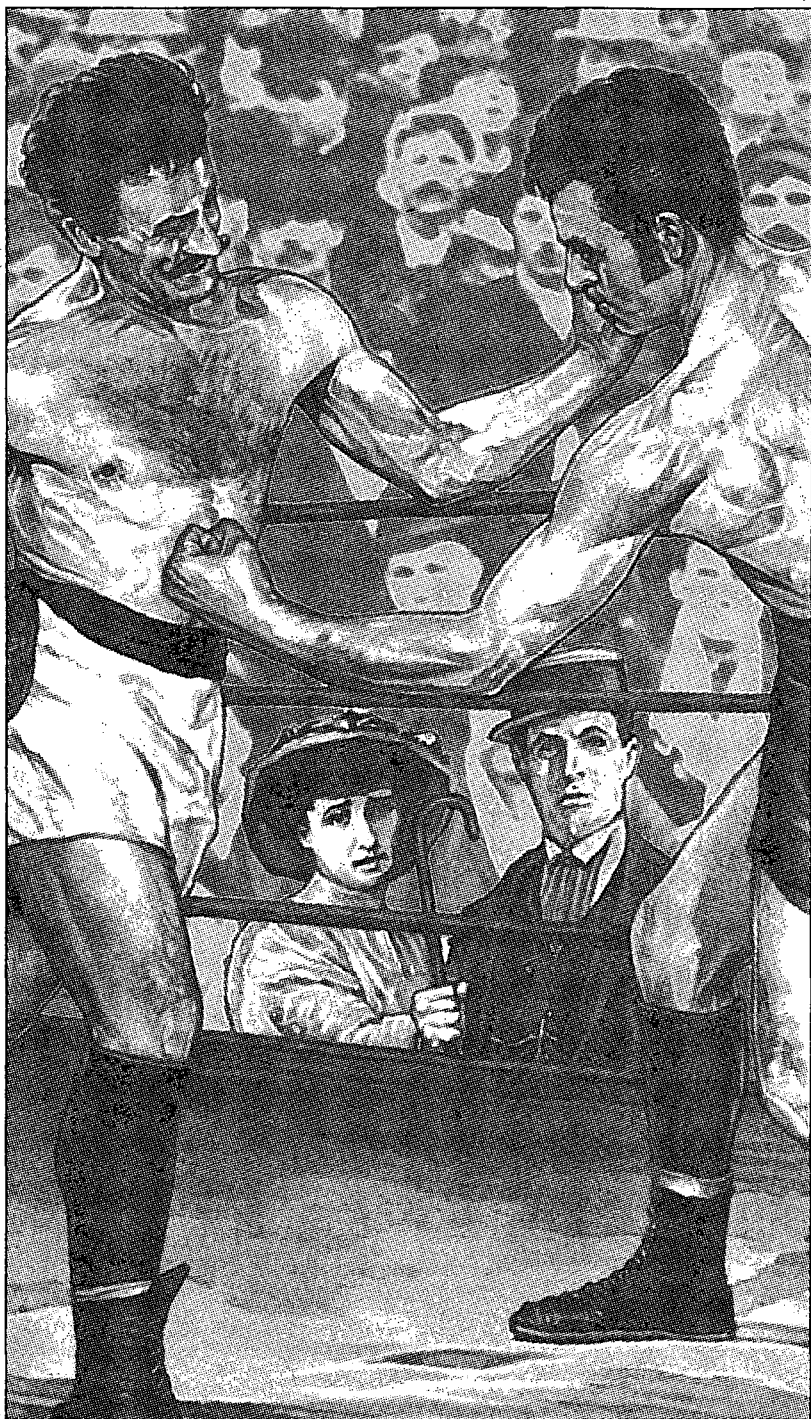
Everyone except the redhead, that is.

She didn't appear to notice any of it. She just walked into the main room, smiled shyly at the floor manager, and whispered something to him. The manager straightened his jacket, stroked his beardless chin, and escorted the lady to one of the back rooms.

And that was all there was to it, as most men would have told the tale. In truth, it was more than a goodly number had noticed. With the keg breaking as it did and the owner raising such a fuss, few men saw the lady at all. And for those that did, they made the natural assumption. A well-dressed lady could only be in a place like the Emporium if she had come there to drag home her husband or her father. As soon as she had her man in hand, she would just as suddenly be going.

That was certainly Corey Callaghan's assumption.

He had noticed the woman as she peered in the door, and had only been momentarily distracted by the beer gusher. In his opinion, a woman like the redhead deserved to be noticed. She had high cheekbones and a sprinkle of freckles on the tip of her nose. Long red hair was pulled back behind her and partially concealed beneath a fashionable hat. A slender but appealing figure was modestly revealed through a high-collared, long-sleeved dress. To every appearance, she was a proper young woman—except, of



course, that she had just entered a gambling saloon.

Corey, himself, was not at the Emporium to gamble. He did gamble on occasion, if he was feeling really wealthy, but he preferred to bet on himself, which in his eyes, was not really gambling at all.

Corey was a bare-knuckle boxer from the Old Country via Boston, and he was here at the Emporium to make certain Patrick, his trainer, got home safely with their money.

Patrick was a rascal of a man, always with a scheme and hidden purpose, but he knew more about punching and footwork than any man Corey had ever known. They had met four years earlier on the docks, and it hadn't been too much longer before Patrick had convinced Corey to give up honest work to make some money on the road. And if there wasn't as much money as Patrick had promised, Corey could still admit that it had been a lot of fun.

Still, seeing a woman like the redhead reminded Corey of all the things a boxer could not have. And a proper young woman like her was foremost among them.

It was time to gather up Patrick and convince him to go home.

The fight started poorly.

Gentleman Tom McGee bounded into the ring and Rock Quarry Callaghan sprang forward to meet him. From that point on, it was all Gentleman Tom's game and Corey might as well have been a spectator rather than a participant. Where he was fast, the Gentleman was lightning. Where Corey was strong, the Gentleman was Hercules. And where Corey was tough, well, in the early rounds of fighting, the Gentleman's toughness was never put to the test.

It was exactly the opposite of what Corey had expected to happen.

He just couldn't land a punch, couldn't keep his rhythm, couldn't find his footwork, and couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. And Gentleman Tom McGee took advantage of Corey's difficulties as only a true professional could. He jabbed, he suckered, he walloped, he smashed, and basically pounded Rock Quarry Callaghan into a gravel pit.

The fight started poorly, but it wasn't finished yet.

"One more round like that, lad, and I'll have to throw in the towel for sure. I don't care how much we lose. No one can stand that kind of a beating."

Patrick O'Sullivan was worried. Four long years and he had never seen the lad like this. No rhythm, no spark, no chance at get-

ting back into it. He wanted to throw in the towel now, but he knew in his heart they couldn't afford it. He'd bet too much. If they lost today, they'd be down to their last twenty-five cents.

"What's wrong with you, lad? You're leading with your chin, your heart's not in your punches, and your mind? I don't know where your mind is. You've got to fight with your wits!"

Patrick stopped speaking when he realized he'd lost Corey. The lad was showing more life than he had all afternoon, craning his neck and looking into the crowd. Looking at what? Patrick twisted around to see, but the only thing unusual out there was a red-haired woman.

With a terrible sinking feeling, he looked back at his Rock Quarry.

The woman spoke to the man beside her, clearly establishing a wager. She looked up, caught Corey staring, and smiled at him. A small jerk of her head directed his attention toward Tom.

Then and there, Rock Quarry Callaghan decided to win.

"Bet dinner," he ordered Patrick before bounding up to his feet.

Patrick stared for another moment, then loyally reached into his pocket and pulled out the two-bit piece. "Two bits!" he yelled. "Two bits says my Rock Quarry can still win!"

The bell rang even as men gathered to bid for the bet.

Like the Gentleman, they were about to learn that a smile can be dangerous.

The Rock Quarry flung himself at his opponent, the change in his demeanor immediately apparent. Not that he was his old self yet, he hurt too much to be that Rock Quarry Callaghan. Brutal rather than graceful, he pushed himself with everything he still had. He needed to balance the fight, bring the Gentleman down to his level, break through his reserves and demoralize him.

Even so, Corey almost didn't get him.

The Gentleman danced back out of reach. He'd seen these desperation plays before. He landed a jab to infuriate, then pranced away again while Callaghan chased him. The strategy should have worked. Corey was dead on his feet and only had a few good punches left in him. The Gentleman had already shown himself superior; now, toward the end of the fight, there should be no question as to who was better. But a flash of red hair, unusual at a match, caught at the corner of the Gentleman's eye. It didn't quite distract him, but at the same moment his foot came down on the end of a shoelace that should have been tied tight. It was uncommonly bad luck. Still, the slip only cost him a moment. No real threat to his balance, it just threw his timing off a notch. And in

that moment, Rock Quarry Callaghan landed a punch with all the remaining strength he had.

Corey's fist flew straight out from his shoulder as Patrick had taught him and caught the Gentleman on the bridge of his nose. Cartilage smashed and cracked beneath it. Blood splattered in all directions. And Rock Quarry Callaghan never let his opponent breathe again.

By the time Corey's own vision had cleared, he was being lifted to the shoulders of the miners who had bet on him. Patrick was shouting the praises of God and Ireland. And the redheaded woman had already collected her money and left.

Patrick was drunk.

"My boy, sure and I don't know how you did it. Heart of a lion, that's me Corey—Rock Quarry, that is. Finest fighter who ever lived!"

Corey had lost count of how many times Patrick had made that toast this evening. The old man had started drinking the moment the Gentleman collapsed unconscious. Corey had been worried about his opponent because the Gentleman was just that, a gentleman. But he had come to after a minute, and they'd had a chance to talk when the crowd quieted.

"Sorry about the nose," Corey had told him.

The Gentleman's voice was distorted from the dried blood plugging his nostrils. "These things happen," he'd agreed, looking none too happy to be on the receiving end. "Thought I had you there. Don't know how you did it."

"Don't know either," Corey told him. "Just glad I did."

"It happens that way every once in a while," Tom agreed. "Well, I'd best pick myself up and see about getting home."

Corey wouldn't have minded going home himself—not that he, like the Gentleman, had a wife and two sons waiting for him. But Patrick needed to celebrate, and it was always best to be doing that when somebody else was buying the rounds. These winnings might have to last them awhile. Corey never knew when Patrick would be able to arrange another fight.

It took only three days, much to Corey's surprise—three days before Patrick had arranged a bout for the biggest purse Corey had ever had a chance at. Three hundred dollars to be paid in golden double eagles, and the only catch was that the promoter insisted on having the match Friday evening—just four days away. That worried Corey a mite. The Gentleman had really given him a beating. But Patrick's greed had been ignited, and he

refused to hear any arguments to the contrary.

"I'm telling you, lad," Patrick kept repeating, "I've seen this kid from Kansas City. Lighting Dan they call him, and to be fair, he's fast, but you've got thirty pounds on him and a crippled boy has better footwork than this kid. You can take Lightning Dan on your worst day and still make it look easy."

Corey had not been convinced, but Patrick would not be swayed. To say they couldn't delay the fight because Lightning Dan was afraid of the Rock Quarry in his prime made no sense at all to Corey. If Dan was so afraid of him, why had he agreed to fight at all?

Slowly, tenaciously, Corey dragged the real reason for the hastily set date out of Patrick. Walter Steed, the eastern moneyman promoting Lightning Dan's career, had wanted his boy to fight Gentleman Tom McGee. The fight and the purse were already set, but thanks to Rock Quarry Callahan, the Gentleman was in no shape to fight this weekend. So Steed was willing to settle for a match with the boxer who had defeated him. And Patrick, a fire with insatiable greed, was afraid that the Gentleman would recover enough to try for the purse himself if they didn't snatch the opportunity to fight on Friday.

Corey wasn't averse to fighting Lightning Dan, but there were two things about the setup that troubled him. First, broken nose or no, he had had no idea that he had hurt the Gentleman so badly. The idea really unsettled Corey. He *liked* the Gentleman and wished there were more in the business like him. Which brought Corey to his second trouble. He just didn't think it was right to snatch this purse away without at least talking to the Gentleman and giving him the chance to throw his hat back in the ring.

Patrick wouldn't agree of course, but Corey saw no choice but to visit the Gentleman and discuss the situation.

Mrs. McGee was not happy to see Corey. That was to be expected, of course. He had just beaten her husband and broken his nose. But the Gentleman's wife was a lady, and much as she looked like she wanted to, she did not shut the door in Corey's face.

"Mr. Callaghan," she greeted him.

Corey pulled the cap off his head and held it awkwardly with two newspaper-covered packages he had brought for the Gentleman's kids. "Ma'am." His voice was hoarse and his mouth suddenly dry. He did not like facing the woman like this. "Is the Gentleman in?"

The two boys appeared, peering around their mother's skirts. Corey reckoned they were six and four. He flashed a painful smile

at them—painful because of the beating he had received last Friday, not because it was directed at kids.

"I've got something for you here," he told them, squatting down without waiting for Mrs. McGee to answer him. He put the cap back on his head and held out one package to each boy. "You must be Little Tom and Jim."

The boys started forward, then pulled back against their mother again. She considered Corey for another moment, then reluctantly smiled and relaxed a bit. "It's alright, children," she announced. "Mr. Callaghan is a friend of your father's." An actual twinkle entered her eye when she added, "despite what happened this weekend."

She stepped back out of the doorway, exposing the kitchen. "Won't you come in, Mr. Callaghan?"

Corey stood up, packages still in hand, and once again removed his cap. "Thank you kindly, ma'am. Is the Gentleman in?"

Mrs. McGee closed the door. "Of course he is. I'll get him."

She left the room in a swish of skirts, leaving Corey with her two children. He waited for her to depart, then got down on his knees to be closer to the children's eye level. He offered the packages again. "I hope you're not going to make me carry these home again," he told them.

Little Tom came forward first and took the newspaper-wrapped bundle into his hands. His younger brother watched as Tom pulled free the paper to find a small wooden soldier concealed within. It was standing rigidly at arms, rifle over the shoulder. The detail work, while not perfect, was still remarkably fine. The younger boy, Jim, took one long look at the figure in his brother's hands, then leapt forward to claim Corey's other bundle.

Corey was still laughing when Mrs. McGee returned.

"My husband will join us in a moment, Mr. Callaghan. Would you like some—" She broke off when she saw the toys her sons were playing with.

"Mr. Callaghan," she admonished him. "There was no need to buy my sons toys. Despite what I said earlier, what happened Friday night was simply part of my husband's profession. You do not need to make amends."

Corey was pleased that she thought the toys fine enough to be purchased. "I didn't buy them, ma'am. I made them. And nothing makes me happier than to see children enjoying a figure I carved."

"Really?" Mrs. McGee was visibly reappraising Corey.

"Aye, ma'am." He shrugged. "I like to work with my hands."

She bent down to her elder boy and took the soldier from him, examining it closely before handing it back. "You're wasting your-

self in the ring, Mr. Callaghan. Just like my husband. You should consider getting out before you ruin those hands."

Corey shrugged again, embarrassed by the compliment and simultaneously irritated by the advice. He was saved from having to respond by the arrival of the Gentleman.

"Callaghan," the boxer greeted him, right hand outstretched as he walked into the room.

Corey shook the offered hand, staring at the Gentleman's face just as he was examining Corey's. The nose had been set and plastered over, but that couldn't conceal the morass of black and blue bruises swelling and distorting his cheeks and lips. "Yes, we did a number on each other," the Gentleman told him.

"That we did," Corey agreed.

"Can I offer you a drink?" The Gentleman walked to a cabinet and took out a jug and two cups.

"Just a wee nip," Corey agreed. "I leave most of my drinking to Patrick."

Mrs. McGee snorted but said nothing.

The Gentleman poured the clear liquid from the jug, then picked up both cups and carried one back to Corey.

"What can I do for you, Callaghan?"

"I want to talk to you about William Steed, Lightning Dan, and a fight being scheduled for Friday evening."

Whatever warmth and ease had been in the room departed as Corey spoke. "Elaine," the Gentleman's voice was quiet, but his tone brooked no argument. "Would you take the boys to their room?"

Corey watched quietly as Mrs. McGee rounded up her sons and herded them out of the kitchen. "You heard your father! Now off with you!"

When children and wife were gone, the Gentleman sighed heavily and invited Corey to take a seat at the kitchen table. "I knew they'd gone to you. Can't say I'm surprised to see you here."

Corey took the seat, cradling the cup in both hands. "I'm really sorry about the money. I feel bad about this."

The Gentleman looked up at him, surprise evident on his face. "I won't be missing that kind of money," he told Corey. "I'm frankly surprised to learn you're so eager to have it."

Corey sat a little straighter in his chair, hearing the scorn in the words but not quite understanding it. "It's the largest purse I've ever had a chance at."

"What chance?" Mrs. McGee walked back into the kitchen. "They aren't talking about giving you a chance."

Corey twisted in his seat so he could face both Mrs. McGee and the Gentleman. "Patrick doesn't have a high opinion of Lightning

Dan. He seems to think I could have taken him even after going fifteen rounds with the Gentleman here."

Mrs. McGee was clearly furious. "And how will you be taking him when you're taking a dive in the fourth?"

Corey was on his feet in a flash. If the Gentleman had said those words he'd already be striking him. He could not keep his voice quiet or calm. "I have never thrown a fight in my life! If you weren't a woman!"

Elaine McGee began an angry retort, but the Gentleman wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back. She struggled with him for a few moments before agreeing to restrain herself. Then it was the Gentleman's turn to be angry. With his wife safely out of reach he whirled around on Corey. "Callaghan, perhaps you'd better explain why you came to see me this evening."

"To offer you a chance to take your fight back!" Corey stormed across the room to the outer door. "What a fool I am, feeling bad for you that our fight cost you the chance at a three hundred dollar purse. What a fool I am, coming here to give you a chance to throw your hat back in the ring and win it!"

Corey grabbed the handle of the door and yanked it open. The Gentleman caught up with him before he could step outside. "Callaghan! Callaghan! I'm sorry. We're both sorry! We misunderstood everything. Please come back."

Corey almost turned and punched him. He was that angry, and the Gentleman had exposed himself in the way he had reached out to take hold of Corey's arm. If he hadn't liked the Gentleman—hadn't actually respected him—Corey would not have restrained himself. But Corey did like Gentleman Tom McGee and until a minute ago, he had thought Mrs. McGee a genuine lady, so he let himself be drawn back into the room so that the Gentleman could close the kitchen door.

"I think," the Gentleman said, "that we've had a misunderstanding. I'd like to explain it to you, but I have to have your word you'll tell no one. You can't even tell Patrick. You see, they've threatened my wife and sons."

"Threatened your—"

"Please, Callaghan, just take a seat at the table and listen to me. Elaine, will you make certain the boys are still in their room?"

The Gentleman's wife left to check on her sons, but not before giving her husband a long stare to make certain he knew she doubted his judgment here.

Corey sat in a wooden chair and the Gentleman sat at the table across from him. His mind was not as quick as his fists, but he believed he understood what had happened. He tested that under-

standing with a quiet question. "Who threatened your family?"

"Steed!" The Gentleman spat out the word. "First he offered a three hundred dollar prize if I could beat his little fancy from Kansas City. Then, a few days after the fight was talked up, he came back around to bribe me to take a dive. When I wouldn't agree, he told me his men would cripple my wife and boys. Wasn't anything I could do. And then you knocked me out and I have never been so glad to lose. Elaine saw it before me. I was too hurt to fight Steed's boy. I may be too hurt to ever return to the ring. I'll give up boxing to save my family, but I'm a man—I don't want to take a dive in front of Steed's fancy kid."

Corey sighed. He had known the three hundred dollar purse was too good to be true. "They've not come to me yet—not spoken to me at all, truth be told. Patrick handles all of the business."

"They'll come, Callaghan. And likely to you and not to Patrick. After all, what can they threaten him with? He's only got you, and everyone knows a boxer's days are numbered from the first time he enters the ring. No, they'll come to you."

"And do what? Bribe me? There's not enough money in the world. And I'm not like you. I don't have a wife and children depending on me."

"Then he'll hurt you."

"I'm a boxer," Corey reminded him. "I understand pain. And if his boys rough me up too bad it will blow the fight on Friday."

"Which he may want, if he really believes you'll beat his fancy."

"Then he cancels the fight," Corey said. "There is nothing he can do to me that will make me take a dive."

Steed approached Corey in the morning at the end of his daily training run—two blocks shy of the flophouse where he and Patrick were boarding. It happened all in a rush—three toughs charging out from between two buildings while the well-dressed Mr. Steed hung back in the early morning shadows.

Corey was tired from his run—four miles in the thin mountain air—and the sweat soaked his shirt and cap-covered hair. He was tired, but he was a fighter born for the ring. He danced easily out of the first two men's way and landed a hard right fist across the jaw of the third. That one spun and hit the ground—no true grit—Corey couldn't imagine why Steed had hired him. There was no sign of Lightning Dan.

The first two toughs whirled in their tracks and rushed back toward Corey. He hopped two paces back, clearing the man he had knocked down and drifting in the direction of Steed. His hands were up, his feet were dancing, and he had no doubt at all that he

would punch these rough fools into next week. He could see it in the way they ran—all brawn and no training. Corey ducked a shoulder and jabbed as the first man darted in. His fist stood the man up straight, but before he could follow through he had to slide to one side in order to avoid the other one. The first tough staggered back, scowling, but by no means looking defeated. The second whirled again, ready to more rationally assist his friend.

Corey prepared to teach both men a lesson in pain.

Steed stirred himself from the shadows. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Callaghan. Boys," he waved toward the two remaining toughs, "pick up Donny and step back out of the way. You've shown me what I wanted to learn this morning."

He stepped fully into the light of early day. He was tall, lean, and dark of hair but not of face. His features were tight, drawn, and hard—not hard as a man's face might get if he did honest work for a living, but hard from lack of charity. His disapproval was evident as he watched his men take hold of themselves, restraining their anger with difficulty. They wanted to fight, but Steed paid them. They scowled, then sidled around Corey to help their still-dazed comrade to his feet, then they gathered together next to Steed and stared sullen hatred at Corey Callaghan.

Corey let them do this. He had seen Steed before, he realized, gambling with the redhead at Corey's fight last weekend. It occurred to him now that this was an opportunity to test what the Gentleman and his wife had said. Not that he disbelieved the Gentleman, but it couldn't hurt to let Steed have his say.

Steed was clearly sizing up Corey as well. "I needed to do that," he announced at last, "because I wanted to see just how much trouble you can cause my Lightning. You were beaten rather soundly by Tom McGee. Frankly, I wasn't certain how much spit you could muster after just a half week."

Steed carried a walking stick—for hitting people, Corey assumed, since the Easterner did not limp. Steed leaned on the stick now, still staring intently at Corey. "I have an offer for you," he told the boxer. "I don't want your answer now. I don't want you to act rashly. Men do stupid things when they act without thinking. My Lightning will beat you. Have no doubt about that. I've seen you fight twice now, and at your best you're just not fast enough to challenge him."

Corey snorted. What Steed had actually witnessed was Corey win two fights against great odds. And the second time without great effort.

Steed ignored the interruption. "My Lightning will beat you, but you are just tough enough and just lucky enough that you might hurt him while he does it." Steed shrugged, taking his weight off

the stick and standing straight again. "And I can't afford to take that risk. I've too much invested in the boy to be letting a dumb mick like you bust him. So here is what you're going to do," Steed leaned close again, returning his weight to the stick, "you're going to put on a show. You're going to dance about. And in the fourth round you're going to let my Lightning knock you out."

Corey's left foot swept out and knocked the stick out from under Steed. Suddenly overbalanced, the Easterner fell heavily to his hands and knees. The thug who had taken Corey's punch and stayed standing started forward, but Steed stopped him. "Get back, Jed!"

Steed struggled to his feet and retrieved his walking stick and hat. "I warned you against acting rashly!" He paused to fix the hat back on top of his head. "I warned you. Now you will reap the consequences."

Steed turned, pushed through his men, and started back into the shadows between the buildings. "We'll speak again, Mr. Callaghan, and then you will regret your actions this morning."

Corey grinned broadly as the four men stalked away.

Corey leapt backward as the plank creaked and cracked beneath him. His right foot caught on the broken wood, and he fell hard off the porch on his seat in the dirt road before the Emporium. He was lucky he hadn't twisted or broken his ankle; the foot had popped free just before the fall could damage it. Corey sat in the road for a moment wondering if he'd been lucky not to be hurt or unlucky to have stepped on rotten wood. A soft, feminine voice recalled his attention to the world around him. "May I give you a hand, Mr. Callaghan?"

Corey looked up to find the redhaired young woman standing next to him. He scrambled to his feet in embarrassment. "I don't know what happened," he explained. "The plank just broke as I stepped on it. Most peculiar thing . . ."

The redhead was not concerned with the porch of the Emporium. "I was hoping to speak with you, Mr. Callaghan. I'm afraid we may not have much time; and I'm not sure that we will have another opportunity."

Corey pulled his attention away from his fall and the porch and focused completely on the redhaired woman. He suddenly remembered that he had last seen her with Steed. His budding suspicions seemed confirmed by the woman's next statement.

"I need your help, Mr. Callaghan. If I could just have a few minutes to explain."

A commotion erupted within the Emporium, distracting both of

their attention. It was a sudden and complete disruption of the normal sounds emanating from the place. First the sounds of laughter and conversation abruptly ceased, followed quickly by a rush of footsteps toward the back of the building. The loud call for a doctor restored the din of voices, and before too long, men burst through the front door of the building.

"Damn!"

Corey twisted back to stare at the redhead, shocked to have heard a woman curse.

She took no notice of his surprise. "I was afraid this would happen. There's nothing to do now but make the best of it and use it if we can." She laid a hand on Corey's upper arm, gripping the muscles tightly with her fingers. "Mr. Callaghan, you'll have to go in. Unless I miss my guess, Mr. O'Sullivan will need you—"

"Mr. O'Sullivan? You mean Patrick?" Horror crossed Corey's face as he began to realize what might have just happened. He began to pull away from the woman, but she held on fiercely.

"Mr. Callaghan," she hissed, still trying to keep her voice from carrying. "You must listen a moment longer! You must speak to me before you confront Steed! If we work together . . ."

Corey stopped struggling for a moment to look at her again, wondering just what she thought she was suggesting. Then he jerked his arm free and hurried into the Emporium to check on Patrick.

There was blood, and quite a lot of it.

Patrick had been laid on his stomach across one of the tables. His gray hair was dark with the liquid seeping up from the crack in his skull. A towel had been pressed against the back of Patrick's head, and it was quickly turning a dark, wet red. The old man was conscious but not quite rational, moaning something about black-hearts and cowards.

Corey pushed his way through the crowd and crouched down beside the table so that Patrick could see his face without moving his head. "What happened, Patrick? Who hurt you?"

"Corey, me lad?" Patrick asked, sending a shiver of dread the length of Corey's spine. How could Patrick not recognize him?

"Corey, me lad?" Patrick asked again.

"I'm here, Patrick. What happened to you?"

Patrick groaned. "Hit me from behind, the cowards. Stole me money, and I was winning tonight . . ." The last statement trailed off in a mournful whine.

"Hit you in here?" Callaghan started to straighten up, searching the faces of the men around him.

"Not here, Callaghan, outside." The voice belonged to John Pope, one of Patrick's circle of card players. "He was winning, sure enough, and drinking up the still. He went out back to pass his water, and someone cracked his skull. Pete Miller found him, and we carried him back in here."

Pete Miller had Patrick's blood on his hands and shirt and still looked deathly concerned about the old man. "I'm obliged to you, Pete," Corey told him.

"He's a tough old geezer," Pete acknowledged. "Just wait until the doc gets here. Old Patrick will pull through."

"When the doc gets here," Corey muttered, looking around the room. "When is the doc going to get here?"

Patrick only needed seven stitches. Corey was shocked that it took so few. All of that blood—but the doc assured him that all head wounds bled like that. "He'll have a hell of a headache when he sobers up," the doc informed him. "And he should stay off his feet, at least until Friday night's fight."

He wouldn't take money. "Just win for me on Friday," he said with a grin. "I've bet enough on you to cover this little visit."

"Friday night," Corey repeated, his voice cold and grim, already wondering how to get Steed.

When all else fails, use the direct approach.

Corey was standing outside the Golden Nugget—Steed's hotel. Patrick was safe at home in bed. Safe for now, that is. Corey was about to do what he could to keep him that way by knocking Steed through a couple of hotel walls. He took a deep breath, then strode up the steps into the hotel.

No clerk was behind the counter. Corey paused for a moment, trying to decide if it was better to ring the bell and wake him, or simply leaf through the register himself. Corey was not concerned about being recognized. He had no doubt that after beating Steed within an inch of his life he was going to find himself spending several years in jail. The trick was to make certain that Steed paid for hurting Patrick before the sheriff arrived and interrupted things. The clerk might raise a ruckus. Corey would check the register himself.

He walked around the counter and found the register on a shelf. It was a large, leather-bound tome. He placed it on top of the counter and flipped through the pages. It was only about a third full. He found the most recent entries and began to scan the names: Walter Sturgeon, Bill Smith, Lou Rutger . . . He turned

back a page, running his finger up the list of names: Pandora Parson, Daniel Wilkins, William Steed.

Corey stopped scanning and focused upon the name: William Steed, Room 201. He closed the book, returned it to the shelf, and headed straight for the stairs. The front door opened and Gentleman Tom McGee hurried through. He was moving very fast and very well—especially for a man who was pretending to be unable to fight on Friday. “Callaghan,” he whispered, “thank God I’m in time.”

Corey paused to look at the Gentleman. The notion flittered through his mind that if the Gentleman hadn’t tried to back out of his arrangement with Steed, then Patrick would not have been hurt tonight. But the thought was unfair and Corey discarded it. The Gentleman was trying to protect his family as Corey should have been protecting Patrick. As he was going to protect Patrick now.

Corey started up the stairs.

“Callaghan!” The Gentleman’s voice was louder this time. The note of relief was changing to desperation. “This won’t help Patrick!”

Corey ignored him, so the Gentleman leapt up the stairs behind him and grabbed hold of Corey’s arm. “Please, Callaghan, think it through, man. Do you think simply beating Steed will keep him off of Patrick? We have to break him. And I think we have a plan.”

Corey paused and turned back to the Gentleman. “Break him?”

“Please, Callaghan, I’ve put my family at risk coming here to you. Steed will wait. Come home with me now, and let us tell you our plan.”

The redhaired woman was in the Gentleman’s kitchen drinking tea with Elaine McGee. Corey stopped in the doorway when he saw her, the anger inside him stoking hot again. “Do you know who she is?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Callaghan,” Elaine McGee answered him. “This is Miss Pandora Parson, an *acquaintance* of Mr. Steed. Won’t you come in and have tea?”

Corey turned angrily toward the Gentleman. “You brought me here for this?”

“Please, Mr. Callaghan,” the redhead asked, “will you give me a chance to explain myself? I think I have thought of a way to let you protect Mr. O’Sullivan, and let the McGees protect their sons, and stop William Steed from ever doing this to anyone again.”

Corey allowed the Gentleman to guide him to a chair.

“Tea, Mr. Callaghan?” Elaine McGee asked again. She lifted an ancient, fragile-looking teapot that could well have come from the

Old Country, and poured the steaming liquid into an equally fragile-looking cup. She set the pot down near the edge of the table. "If you don't mind, Tom, I would like to get us started." When her husband did not protest, Mrs. McGee continued. "Mr. Callaghan, am I correct in assuming that Mr. Steed has approached you in regard to throwing Friday's fight?"

Corey restrained his temper and answered only the question. "Aye."

"And knowing your reputation, Mr. Callaghan, I'm certain we can assume that you rejected Mr. Steed's offer."

"Aye."

She nodded. "Just as my Tom did. And now, as he did, you have learned that rejecting Mr. Steed's wishes does not affect only yourself. Your problem and Tom's problem are quite similar. How do you stop Mr. Steed from threatening those you care about? Miss Parson's problem is somewhat different, and if you are to trust her enough to continue this conversation, I think you need to hear how she met Mr. Steed, and why she travels in his company."

Miss Parson took a sip of tea and looked uncomfortably at Corey. "I think, Mr. Callaghan, that I will actually have to start a little earlier than that." She sipped again, considering.

"My mother died when I was very young. I really don't remember her at all. Just little things I associate with her in my mind—a white dress, the smell of cinnamon, and her silver wedding ring."

"My father was left alone to raise me. He was a good man, but he couldn't hold a steady job no matter how hard he tried. Some people get the wanderlust and move from place to place. My father had a gambling lust. He was only truly happy in a card game. When most girls were in the kitchen learning to cook from their mothers, I was at a table with my father learning to shuffle decks and play cards. And when my father died, he left me only two things: my skill in games of chance and my mother's wedding ring."

As she spoke, Miss Parson's eyes had slowly drifted down from Corey's face until she stared straight into the teacup in her hands. "I started gambling myself when my money ran low. I knew the games well, and I had always been lucky. I was good at it. I *am* good at it. I got by, slowly building a stake, which opened a higher quality game. Until one day I got into a game a little over my head and had a full house king high and no money left to call the bet. Mr. Steed was at the table and had already folded out of the hand. He offered to lend me the money I needed to finish the hand, with my mother's ring as surety. I accepted his offer and lost the hand. It's the only time I have ever seen a man draw four of a kind in straight five card stud."

She paused, took a sip of tea, and swallowed hard. "So I lost my mother's ring and my luck has been . . . *erratic* ever since."

Miss Parson stopped and took a deep breath. Mrs. McGee reached forward to pat her hand. Her arm brushed the teapot, shifting it slightly on the table. For a moment the pot tottered on the edge. The Gentleman leaned forward to grab it as his wife quickly pulled back her hand with the same intention. They succeeded only in jarring the table. The pot shifted again and fell spinning to the floor to land miraculously unharmed at Mrs. McGee's feet. The McGees and Corey froze in place looking at the undamaged teapot. Miss Parson did not appear to notice. At length, she broke the silence. "My luck," she said again, "has been erratic ever since."

Mrs. McGee shifted her attention back to the young woman, staring in bewilderment. Then she reached down toward the floor and lifted the teapot carefully in her hands. She began to place it more firmly on the table, thought better of it, stood, and carried it to the kitchen counter. She stood there for a moment steadying her nerves.

Corey sat back in his chair, suddenly cognizant of the strange events that happened in Miss Parson's presence: the keg, the porch, the teapot. He was Irish and he understood luck, but this luck set his brain to hurting when he focused on it. He consciously willed his attention back to the task at hand. "What I don't understand," he said, slowly articulating each word. "What I don't understand is why you are still traveling with Steed."

Miss Parson did not immediately answer. Elaine McGee returned cautiously to the table. "Because, Mr. Callaghan," she said, trying to act as if nothing unusual had happened, "Mr. Steed still has Miss Parson's ring. He won't sell it back to you, will he, my dear?"

"It's my luck," the younger woman confirmed indirectly, "my last memory of Mama. I can't leave it with him."

Corey tried to think about what Miss Parson had explained about herself, and he just couldn't understand how it related to his problem protecting Patrick. He said as much. "So Steed is a snake, Miss Parson. We already knew that. I don't understand how this helps us. Are you asking us to help you recover your mother's ring?"

"Yes."

"I think, Mr. Callaghan," Elaine McGee interrupted, firmly in control of herself again, "that Miss Parson's story tells us that she is not Mr. Steed's friend. And on that basis, I'm asking you to listen to her plan. She and I have discussed it in some detail while Tom was out looking for you. I think it has merit. There is risk to you and to her, but if we succeed, William Steed will be finished in Denver forever."

Pandora Parson wet her lips. "It really all depends upon you, Mr. Callaghan. Can you defeat Lighting Dan?"

Corey nodded firmly. He had never seen Dan fight, but he trusted Patrick's opinion. The Gentleman confirmed his appraisal. "Dan's fast, but Callaghan is tough. The real question is, can Callaghan knock him out quickly enough?"

"No, Mr. McGee," Pandora corrected him. "The real question is, can Mr. Callaghan convince Mr. Steed that he has reluctantly agreed to throw the fight in order to save Mr. O'Sullivan?"

The second time William Steed approached Corey Callaghan, his flanking men were armed with axe handles. They were standing between the same two buildings, waiting patiently for Corey to run past.

Corey had considered running a different route—no sense in making things easy for Steed—but his pride hadn't permitted it. Besides, if he was to hold up his end of the plan, he would have to confront Steed sooner or later. In truth, Callaghan's calculated submission was no more humiliating or distasteful than Miss Parson's role. She would be gambling her virtue on Corey's fists—and her peculiar gambler's honor might well force her to pay her debt to Steed if Corey failed.

Corey halted his run and faced Steed and his men. "I see your boys learned a lesson yesterday," he told him.

"The question, Mr. Callaghan," Steed replied, "is did you learn a lesson last evening?"

Corey scowled. "Aye, that I did. Now what do you think is to prevent me from pulling out of the fight?"

Steed smiled, a cruel upward turning of his thin face. "Why nothing at all, Mr. Callaghan. But if you do pull out, the next time Patrick O'Sullivan is robbed in the night you have my personal guarantee that he will not survive."

Corey bristled. The men with the axe handles tightened their grips. Corey forced his Irish temper back down under firm control. "Aye," he said quietly. "I figured you'd say something like that. I just wanted to hear the words." He spit distastefully on the ground between them. "No use beating around the bush. I'll take your dive."

Steed's smile broadened. "Sense at last."

Corey spit again. "There is one condition."

"Condition?" Steed's smile hardened, then relaxed again as understanding lit his features. "Oh, the matter of payment."

"Save your money," Corey told him. "I'm not doing this for that."

"Really?" Steed looked genuinely surprised, then a faint trace of suspicion touched his face.

"Aye, my condition is that no one ever tells Patrick. If he knew I took a dive, I could never look him in the face again."

Cruel pleasure replaced suspicion on Steed's features. Corey wondered if Steed knew his face was so expressive, or if the man simply didn't care if the boxer knew Steed was lying to him. "I accept your condition, Mr. Callaghan. Mr. O'Sullivan will never learn of our arrangement." Corey could not help but wonder how long after the fight was finished Steed was actually planning to wait to break the news to Patrick and gloat over the old man's pain. Not that it ultimately mattered. Corey wasn't going to throw the fight. Making the condition had been Miss Parson's idea. She felt it would encourage Steed to believe he had broken Corey.

"Alright then," he muttered, and turned to leave.

"One more thing, Mr. Callaghan," Steed interjected.

Corey turned back to face him.

"I want the fight thrown in the fourth round. No use making my Lightning get too winded."

Corey saw none of his coconspirators over the next two days, although he knew in general what they were doing. The Gentleman was quietly using all of the influence he had to convince the wealthiest and most unforgiving men in Denver to bet heavily with Steed that Corey Callaghan would defeat his lad. Many of those gentlemen would guess that a play was in the works, but Tom McGee's reputation was golden. He would bring the gamblers in, and with luck, Steed, in his certainty that the fight was fixed, would over-extend himself and anger some very dangerous people.

Miss Parson, for her part, would also appear taken by Rock Quarry Callaghan's reputation. She would, of course, know that Steed liked to be certain of things, but would bet her mother's ring against her virtue that Corey Callaghan would not surrender to Steed's plans. Steed had worked at breaking Miss Parson to his will for seven long months. He would take great pleasure in the thought of completing his conquest. Miss Parson was certain he would gamble on his sure thing.

As for Corey, he had but to keep training and keep tending Patrick—waiting for Friday night.

The fight began with the clear ring of the bell, and Rock Quarry Callaghan and Lightning Dan both danced into the ring. Patrick stood in Corey's corner where he always did, a large white bandage still plastered across his head. William Steed and Pandora Parson stood side by side in the front of the crowd near Dan's corner. Corey wasn't certain if either of the McGees had come to see the fight.

Lightning Dan danced around Corey, a confident sneer upon his face. He did look fast—his body supple and lean—but Corey still had a solid thirty pounds on the man. He felt confident he could knock the sneer off his face if he could land one solid blow to the head.

Dan darted in and jabbed Corey twice on the chin. The blows stung, sort of, but they certainly weren't punches like the Gentleman would have landed. Dan's sneer progressed to a nasty grin, as if he thought he had just really pummeled Callaghan. It suddenly occurred to Corey that Dan was a man who had *never* won fairly in the ring. Steed didn't just fix the big fights—he fixed all of his boy's battles.

Dan shot back within range and stung Corey with a quick combination. *Stung* Corey, not hurt him, but from the cocky look on the boxer's face Lightning Dan was sure these were punishing blows. Could it be Dan didn't know his fights were fixed? Could Steed have actually hidden that from him?

If so, Corey knew how he would beat him. When Lightning Dan approached again, Corey retreated, overreacting to each glancing blow. The crowd did not like it—did not really believe it—but Lightning Dan believed, and Corey let him go on believing until the bell sounded, ending the round.

"What's gotten into you, lad?" Patrick asked him. "Don't tell me you're afraid of those little girly slaps he's giving you."

Corey sloshed water around his mouth, then spit it into the bucket. "Did you train me to be afraid, Patrick?"

"I did not!" the older man sputtered.

"Then trust your training," Corey told him, and jumped up and ran back to the center of the ring. Miss Parson was observing him with what could only be concern in her eye. The man next to her yelped as he leaned too close to his smoking friend and set his own mustache on fire. A foamy beer extinguished the flame before it could actually burn the man, soaking his shirt and adding to the confusion.

Lightning Dan approached Corey from his corner of the ring. "Ready for more pain?" he asked. Corey forced himself not to smile. "When I'm finished with you," Dan promised, "they'll call you Gravel Pit Callaghan."

Corey's only answer was another round of retreating around the ring.

"What is wrong with you, lad?" Patrick asked him. "You're letting him drive you all over the place!"

"Patrick." Corey placed his arm around the old man's shoulders

and pulled him close so that no one else could hear him. "I need you to help me now! I have to put him down before the end of the fourth. Do I make my move now? Or do I wait one more round?"

"Make your move?" Patrick asked. "By the end of the fourth? Do you mean to tell me you're . . ." The old man smiled. "And I was believing something was wrong. Did you make a bet you didn't tell me about?"

"Patrick!" The referee was signaling Corey to come out of his corner. "Wait? Or take him now?"

Patrick stopped smiling and met Corey's gaze. "You take that little fancy down now and stop embarrassing me!"

Corey smiled, a mistake he later learned, but he could not have kept the expression from his face if he had wanted to. "You watch your back, Patrick! Let me worry about the ring."

Lightning Dan danced out to meet Corey. "You tired of hurting yet, Gravel Pit? Thinking of finding a new profession?"

"I don't think so," Corey answered. "I like to work with my hands."

The starting bell rang and Rock Quarry Callaghan decked Lightning Dan. It was the first solid punch Corey had tried to throw that evening, and Lightning Dan clearly wasn't expecting it. One moment the boxer from Kansas City was grinning in anticipated triumph. The next he was staggering backward all the way to the ropes that mark the edges of the ring. It would have been a mercy if he had fallen, but God wasn't feeling merciful that day and neither was Rock Quarry Callaghan. He was next to Dan even as he rebounded off the ropes, landing body blows that lifted the smaller man to the tips of his toes. Two ribs cracked, and Corey turned his attention to his opponent's too handsome face. Left, right, left, Dan's head never had the opportunity to fully snap back to its normal position. The referee was moving in to separate the two men; the crowd was screaming in a frenzy. Corey took a step back, throwing out his left arm to ward off the referee. He cocked his right arm far, far back. Dan tottered helplessly in front of him. The stupid fool had really believed he could defeat boxers like the Gentleman and Rock Quarry Callaghan. It was time for Dan to learn that he really didn't belong in the ring. Corey swung with everything he had, snapping Dan back off the ropes to collapse truly unconscious on the floor.

Corey spun to share in Patrick's wild grin. The old man leaped with joy and threw his old cap high into the air. "You did it, me lad. I knew you weren't afraid of Steed's little fancy." The crowd, wild with excitement, began to pile into the ring to congratulate

Corey. For a few critical seconds Corey lost himself in the celebration. Then with growing dread he realized who he did not see celebrating—and who he did not see paying his debts.

Suddenly frantic, Corey began peering over the heads around him, searching for Steed and Miss Parson. They had left their place at the ring, and he couldn't find them in the crowd. Surely he ought to be able to see that shock of red hair even in this press of people. They weren't by the front door, nor by the barrels of beer, nor—wait! There was Steed striding purposefully toward the back entrance, left arm firmly around Miss Parson's shoulders, propelling her along beside him. His left hand clutched, but did not use, his walking stick.

At the door, they struggled briefly before Steed dropped his walking stick and grabbed hold of Miss Parson's right bicep. Then they were through the door and out of Corey's line of vision.

Corey turned back to Patrick, who had let Corey slip from his attention as he accepted the congratulations of a mob of excited spectators. He reached between two people to grasp Patrick's forearm. The old man looked over at him, caught the frantic expression on Corey's face, and immediately lost his grin. Corey pulled him close enough that he could shout in the old man's ear. "Steed has Miss Parson!" He knew Patrick wouldn't understand that, but he said it anyway. "Remember to watch your back!"

Then he let go of Patrick and forced his way out of the ring. By this time, others were starting to look for Steed as well. They were quite naturally interested in acquiring their winnings. Corey still didn't know it, but it was his smile before the start of the round that had forewarned Steed of his plans and given him the few moments lead he needed to make good his escape. Corey did not stop to rally these men to help him, however. In his gut he knew that he could not afford to delay.

Corey burst out onto the street and looked wildly in all directions. Some of the crowd had preceded him, others were spilling out behind. He caught a glimpse of what might be Steed's tall head turning left into a side street and sprinted in that direction. The streets were dark and most buildings did not have lanterns on the porch to help illuminate the way. But the moon was nearly full and four million stars burned overhead, so Corey could see a little as he pursued Steed and Miss Parson. He dashed into the side street in time to see a man and woman turning the corner at the end. He reached that corner in time to see Steed half dragging Miss Parson down the middle of what was really just a little alleyway. The light was poor, but strong enough for Corey to see the

tiny derringer jammed into Miss Parson's ribs when Steed whirled them both around to face him.

Steed's face was a scowl of bitter hatred. "Callaghan!" he spat the word as if it were a curse. Spittle bubbled on his lower lip. "Callaghan! You bastard mick!"

Corey stopped running, standing perhaps ten feet away from Steed. He put his hands palm out in front of him in an effort to appear less threatening. Rats squeaked and scurried near the sides of the buildings, but no other sounds and no hint of help could be heard coming.

The spittle dropped off of Steed's chin. "You cheated me, Callaghan! No man cheats me!"

"It was a fair fight," Corey protested. He didn't add that it was quite likely the only fair fight Lightning Dan had ever had.

"I didn't want a fair fight!" Steed snarled. "I told you to take a dive!"

"And I showed you I couldn't be intimidated."

The hand on the derringer wavered as Steed started to point it toward Corey. Then he changed his mind and dug the muzzle back into Miss Parson's ribs. She grunted quietly with the pain. "Really, William," she noted, "I don't understand your reaction. You simply lost a gamble. It happens to the best of us. It's hardly appropriate to make a scene."

Steed twisted the derringer cruelly in Miss Parson's side. "Shut up! I will not be cheated! I will not be made a fool!"

Miss Parson's eyes flashed with surging anger, and she pivoted to face Steed, turning her side to Callaghan, letting Steed plant his gun firmly in her stomach. "I did not cheat you! I told you clearly I did not believe Mr. Callaghan could be convinced to take a fall. You believed otherwise. And you lost!"

Corey was concerned that Miss Parson was pulling the full brunt of Steed's anger onto herself. He took a step forward, drawing a menacing gesture from Steed's gun. "You weren't cheated, Mr. Steed. There's not a man or woman in Denver who would think that you were. Now why don't you put down the gun and be man enough to take your loss?"

"Man enough!" Steed stepped backward and yanked Miss Parson's arm, spinning her about so that she stood between the two men, facing Corey. He dug the derringer into the small of her back. "Do you really think a *man* takes a loss? I'm not beaten yet." He took another backward step, dragging Miss Parson with him. "I am not beaten yet!" He said more firmly. "And you and Miss Parson and that stupid old man will pay dearly for what you did to my Lightning tonight."

Steed took a third step back. As he was not looking behind him, he did not see that he was walking at an angle and moving closer to the wall of one of the buildings. He also did not see that two of the rats had left the dubious shelter of the deeper shadows to examine Steed and Miss Parson more closely. He took a fourth step and put his heel squarely down upon the tail of one of the rats. It was an extremely improbable occurrence, but unlikely mishaps had plagued Denver since Steed's arrival some two weeks past—had in fact been following him for the seven months since he had refused to allow Miss Parson to redeem her mother's ring.

The rodent shrieked in pain.

Startled, William Steed looked down at the street behind him.

Miss Pandora Parson twisted in his grasp, moving the muzzle of the derringer out from against her back.

And Corey Callaghan charged forward three steps and drove his right fist into the bridge of Steed's nose.

Cartilage crushed and blood splattered. Steed lost his grip on Miss Parson and staggered back into the wall. His head cracked against wooden planks, and he fell heavily on his backside in a half-sitting sprawl. Corey moved in against him, catching Steed's arm with his left hand as he struggled to bring the gun to bear on him. His right fist punched Steed in the face again. The Easterner's skull cracked against the wall, and his eyes rolled up in his head.

Corey took the derringer out of Steed's hand and tossed it to the other side of the street. "I'm presuming," he said to Miss Parson, "that he didn't give you your ring back."

Miss Parson finished straightening her dress. "No, Mr. Callaghan, he did not." She smiled, just a tired little turning of the lips, "but he taunted me with it earlier. It's in his waistcoat pocket."

She stepped over next to Corey and looked down on the unconscious William Steed. Blood from his disfigured nose painted his face and continued to seep from his nostrils. "That was quite a punch, Mr. Callaghan."

Corey shrugged and offered an embarrassed smile. "I like to work with my hands."

Miss Parson squatted down beside Steed and felt inside his waistcoat pocket. For a moment, her fingers were frustrated, then they touched metal, and a brilliant smile illuminated her face. She pulled the ring clear of the pocket and looked at it in the weak moonlight. A simple silver band was all that Corey could see—no stones, no real finery, just a thin band of unpretentious silver. Miss Parson brought the ring to her lips and closed her eyes. Corey thought she might be praying. Then she opened her eyes, slipped the ring upon the fourth finger of her right hand, and offered

Corey her left. He took the hand and steadied her while she found her feet. They stood facing each other for a moment before he reached out and took hold of her right hand as well.

"Thank you, Mr. Callaghan," she whispered.

"My pleasure, Miss Parson," Corey began to tilt his head down toward her lips.

"Callaghan, thank God you're alright!" Gentleman Tom McGee came around the corner into the side street. The doc was with him, and some fifty other men were crowding the street behind them.

"When Patrick told me you took off after Steed, I was afraid there was going to be trouble." The Gentleman broke off when he saw the battered body lying next to the boxer. "I guess I should have known you could handle it."

Corey let go of Miss Parson's hands and stepped around her to face the crowd. "Well I did," he confirmed. "Steed didn't like his boy losing in the ring, and he tried to welsh on his bets." That comment produced an angry mutter from the crowd, but Corey continued over it. "He tried to drag Miss Parson along with him, but she had more honor than that. There's a woman who thinks a man should pay his debts."

That was a second blow against Steed's reputation. It was time to go for the knockout. "His little gun is over there," Corey announced, "by the side of the building."

The muttering in the crowd increased in volume. Unfortunately for him, Steed chose that moment to stir and groan. Ben Johnson stepped forward. He was a local mine owner and one of the Gentleman's dangerous and unforgiving men.

"You did well tonight, Callaghan. I truly enjoyed the way you suckered that fool Lightning Dan." He snorted with laughter. "As if anyone would believe you were afraid of that fancy pants." His cold and merciless eyes swept down to where Steed was touching his hands to his battered face. "You did well tonight," he repeated. "But if you'll excuse us, Callaghan, these gentlemen and I would like to have some words with Mr. Steed."

Corey dropped Patrick's suitcase in the street beside the stage-coach station, then swung his own duffel down beside it. Instead of drinking in celebration, he and Patrick had stayed up late in the night and discussed the situation. Corey had laid out everything for the old man. Steed's threats, the attack, the pressure to throw the fight, the plan to get Steed. Patrick had listened to everything—at times red-faced with anger, and at times so proud of Corey he was almost crying. They had agreed that leaving Denver was the prudent thing. They had no roots here like the Gentleman

and his family. And they really couldn't be certain that Ben Johnson would permanently *deal* with William Steed.

So they had decided to move on. They'd start for Cheyenne and if they didn't like it, well, the West was large. Corey's only regret was that they weren't taking leave of their friends. They'd made a lot of them in Denver, and not just the McGees and Miss Parson. It was rude to just up and leave, but Steed had threatened to kill Patrick, and Corey had severely beaten the man. All things considered, both men were ready to head north and take their chances in Wyoming.

The stage driver stepped out of the station and touched his hat. "Pilgrims, why don't you throw your bags back on top of the stage. We'll leave in a few minutes."

Corey picked the bags back up and walked over to the coach. He tossed both bags easily onto the roof.

"Damn," Patrick muttered. "Didn't that lass cause enough trouble?"

Corey followed Patrick's gaze and found Miss Parson, carpetbag in hand, walking toward them. A gentle smile lit her face. Her mother's silver wedding ring adorned her finger. She walked directly to them and set down her bag. "Good morning, Mr. O'Sullivan, Mr. Callaghan," she greeted them.

Corey and Patrick tipped their caps.

She faced Corey directly. "I'm sorry we were interrupted last night. Are you and Mr. O'Sullivan traveling to Cheyenne?"

"Interrupted?" Patrick sputtered, realizing that Corey had *not* actually told him everything that had happened.

"Aye, we are," Corey answered Miss Parson, realizing he was grinning like an idiot. "It seems like a good time to hit the trail."

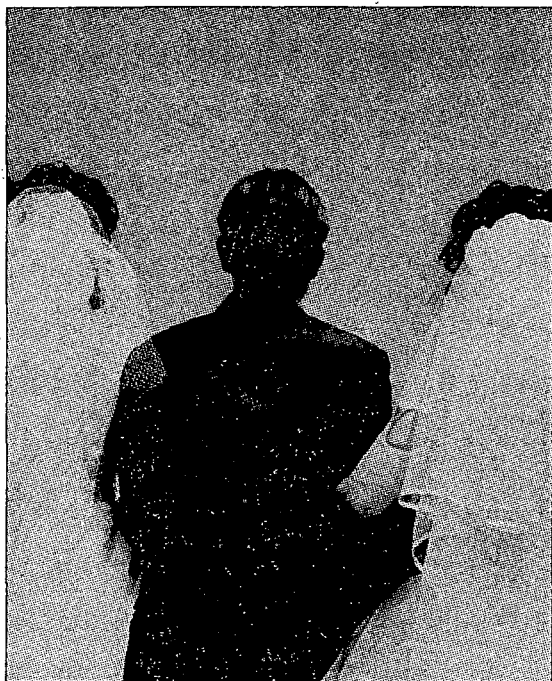
"I quite agree." She looked down at her bag. "If you'd help me stow this, Mr. Callaghan, I think I'll find my seat."

She stepped past them, leaving both men staring after her as she climbed into the stage.

Patrick shook his head. "No good will come of it, Corey me lad. How many times must I tell you? Bad luck follows women—especially that one. You know what they say in the Emporium?" He craned his neck looking around them, seeking some path of escape. "Maybe we should go south to Tucson. If we go with her, we may not make it to Cheyenne. The stage will probably break a wheel halfway down the road."

Corey was still grinning. "That's okay, Patrick. I can fix a wheel. I like to work with my hands." 🦋

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Solomon's Wedding

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "July/August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January/February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

CLOSING TIME

DAVE ZELTSERMAN

When I walk into Donlan's there's a loud chorus of "Dev," just as the bar patrons used to yell "Norm" in the old sitcom *Cheers*. These days I am going by the name Devlin Smith. Over the years I've gone by a number of different names, which is important in my line of work. My current business card reads: DEVLIN SMITH—DEALER IN ANTIQUITIES AND RARE OBJECTS. While the name's phony, for the most part the rest of the card's correct, although you could argue how rare the objects really are that I collect.

Anyway, I acknowledge the greeting with the same sort of wave the aforementioned Norm used to give. I even look a bit like Norm these days, although I'm quite a bit taller. About six and a half feet, topping out at three hundred pounds.

Jack already has a pint of Murphy's waiting for me. "Right on cue, Dev," he says as he hands me the glass, a genuine smile stretching his lips.

"Now what in the world would make me miss my night at Donlan's?" I answer back. "And you better start pouring more drinks. Round for the house on me."

Another cheer roars through the pub. They know that I'll be buying rounds all night. I take a sip of the Murphy's, grateful that Jack had poured me the ale instead of waiting for my order. I'd been hankering all day for a Jameson, and that wouldn't have done me any good. Alcohol has always been my downfall. If I started with whiskey this early, who knows what trouble I'd get into? Better to stretch the night with Murphy's and finish off with a couple of Jamesons. I really do enjoy my nights at Donlan's, and it would be a shame to lose them over a sloppy night of drinking. I let out a sigh of relief that Jack had been looking out for me and say a silent prayer for him.

Katy's working the tables and stops by to give me a wink and a smile bright enough to blind. "Howya doin' Dev?" she says. "It's great to have ya here, ya know?" She's a little thing, barely able to fill out a size two pair of jeans. But as cute and perky as any I'd

ever seen, and I've seen many, trust me. Blond hair, blue eyes, slightly upturned nose, and that perfect Irish skin.

"Seeing you makes it all worthwhile," I tell her. "Screw all this. Let's say you and me get married after your shift and I'll show you how well I'm really doing." She giggles at that, her face blushing a perfect amount of pink.

"Ah, if only you weren't joking me," she says, and then grabs a tray of drinks and squeezes by, turning back to give me one last wink.

I take another long drink of my Murphy's, and I am surprised to see the pint glass already empty. Jack has another glass waiting for me. I make a mental note to slow down. Then I stand for a moment soaking in the atmosphere of Donlan's and smile broadly at all the beaming faces that are turned my way already smiling at me.

Four months earlier, I had business up north and stopped off afterwards in Dublin for what I thought would be a couple of days' rest and relaxation. Then I found Donlan's. Now Dublin is a city of over a hundred bars, many of them these days trendy, loud with music blaring, and filled with well-dressed, beautiful, but basically plastic people. I can have fun in places like that, and usually in my own way find them rewarding, but Donlan's was something special. Genuine salt-of-the-earth types. Good wholesome people. So I stretched my vacation from a few days to four months. Well, sort of, because in a way, I'm always working.

I squeeze through the bar area, getting numerous slaps on the back. Donlan's seats forty, another thirty can crowd by the bar. These days, the place is stuffed to the rafters since word got out about that generous Yank from Brooklyn buying rounds all night long. Still, as I look around and notice most of the faces, the regulars are still fighting their way in each night.

In reality, I'm not from Brooklyn, not even from North America, but I guess I developed that heavy accent from the years I spent in New York. Anyway, I saw no reason to correct these people's impression. With some amusement I've noticed an Irish brogue slipping into my speech patterns recently. If I stay here long enough, next place I go all the locals will assume I'm Irish.

Gerald Herrity, an eighty-year-old duffer who could barely keep his false teeth in his mouth, starts to get up from his bar stool to offer me his seat. I place my arm around his shoulder to keep him where he is. "I don't mind standing awhile," I say to him. He flashes me a drunken grin, his eyes already glazing from the alcohol, and then raises his shot glass for a salute.

I raise my own pint glass, and with some alarm notice the glass

is again empty. Another mental note to slow myself down. I catch Jack's eye and he starts pouring me another draft.

A thin, fiftyish man with a shock of white hair is making his way over so he can pump my hand.

"Devlin, an honor to be able to spend the night drinking with the likes of you."

I like the guy. He's a writer from Galway, been coming to Donlan's the last two weeks. Probably made the trip to Dublin on word of my nightly buying routine at Donlan's.

"Pleasure's all mine, Ken."

Jack works his way through the other patrons so he can hand me a fresh pint, and I indicate to him from this point on to make the switch to Jameson. He gives me a wary eye but acknowledges my request. I turn back to this Galway writer of all things criminal and dark.

"I finished your wonderful manuscript," I tell him. "A thing of pure beauty. I loved every second of it." And I'm not kidding him. I really did.

"Now if I can only find a publisher with the bollocks to print it," the Galway writer tells me, smiling somewhat bitterly. He finishes his Jameson in a gulp. I signal to Jack with four fingers to bring us a couple more apiece.

"I don't understand why they wouldn't," I say.

"Too dark and violent for them, I guess."

"To me it could be even darker." I finish the last of my Murphy's and take the shot glasses from Jack, handing two of them to Ken. I hold one of my shot glasses up to the light and study the amber beauty of it. My hand shakes slightly. Deep down I know I'm making a mistake, but I've had the taste of whiskey on my tongue all day.

"As much as I love your manuscript," I tell the writer, "you could make it even darker. Screw them. You need to make it even more over the top, more violent. I can give you some ideas I have about what more you could do with your hero."

"You mean my antihero. There's no hero in this one."

"Sure. Whatever." I spot Mick. I've been counseling him every night for the last three weeks about a problem of his, and I'm anxious to talk more with him. I slap Ken on the back, leaving him nodding, thinking over what I said.

Mick's looking glum. I can almost feel the lump in his throat. When he sees me he tries to smile, but it doesn't stick.

"I don't think Cara cares for me," he tells me.

Katy's walking by. I ask if she can bring a tray of Jameson. Knowing the shape Mick's in, he's going to need them.

"Mick," I say to him. "I've seen the two of you. I know about

these things. I've been the same place you are now. Trust me, okay?"

We stand together silently twiddling our thumbs until Katy brings over the tray. After a few more shots each, I ask him if he's been calling Cara and telling her all the things I've told him to tell her.

"I have," he admits. "Although it don't seem right."

"Sometimes you have to let them know you won't take no for an answer. Trust me, Mick. I've been there."

With some disbelief, I realize the tray is loaded with nothing but empty shot glasses. Fortunately, Katy is within earshot. I signal for a fresh tray. After she brings it over and Mick and I have a few more shots, I explain to him that sometimes actions mean more than words.

"Mick, I can see in her eyes how she feels about you. Sometimes a girl's just shy. Sometimes you need a boy to act like a man. Are you a man?"

Mick shoots down another tumbler of whiskey, his jaw hardening. He nods.

"Well, goddamn it, show her you're a man," I tell him. "Go straight to her apartment now and give her what she's been wanting."

Gawd, he's drunk. In the state he's in I doubt he could get it up. More likely he'll end up beating her to death. Still, Mick takes a deep breath, then clenches his jaw even tighter. I give him a slap on the back and send him on his way.

Of course, I'm laughing on the inside. I saw the way Cara had looked at him in the past. No interest whatsoever. Still, this is what I do.

I can feel someone staring at me, feel the hotness of it. I turn and see Katy, her eyes now narrow and beady as she looks at me, her mouth scrunched up into some sort of hurt look. All the cuteness and perkiness has been bled out of that tiny little body of hers. "I overheard you talking to Mick," she says, her voice cautious, controlled. "I don't think that was good advice at all. Someone's going to get hurt."

I finish off the last of the Jameson. How many does that make? Eleven, twelve? I've lost count. "Don't worry, darling," I tell her. "Everything will work out as it should."

For a moment I'm lost in thought. I'm thinking about the events that are going to unfold between Mick and his darling Cara, about whether he'll end up beating her to death or whether she uses that gun I had sent to her. Then my mind drifts to other bar patrons I had counseled at Donlan's and the violent ends they have recently met. There was George O'Halloran, suspecting his

wife of cheating on him, and me telling him about it all being hogwash and convincing him where and when he should surprise her, all in the name of romance. And then there was Seamus, a disillusioned young man needing some meaning to his life. The advice I gave him over two months about how he could make a difference in Belfast, and only a few short weeks later his corpse being returned back to Dublin for a proper burial. And there were others, maybe not making as big a splash, but the damage still done. You see, I'm always working. Even when on vacation, I'm always working. Always collecting . . .

I'm laughing now, silently, but uncontrollably. I mean it's all so damn funny. I notice Katy now, her mouth twisted into a look of pure horror, her face utterly drained of blood. I don't get it. Why that reaction, just from a few uncontrollable belly laughs?

"Looksh, darling—" I realize I'm now slurring my words. Then I stop dead, also realizing what she has noticed. What the whole bar has noticed. 'Cause Donlan's is now dead as any morgue. For a long ten-count, utter silence. Then you can hear all of their bloody hearts beating like crazy.

What they're all staring at, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, is that I have slipped up and given myself away. My hoofs are now visible, and my tail, red as any flame and sharper than any dagger, has ripped through my pants. As I said before, alcohol has always been my downfall. With Pontius Pilate it was wine, with the pharaoh it was mead, with the tsars it was vodka. So it has always been. And, as I am sure, so will it always be. As much as I have enjoyed my nights at Donlan's, I have to face facts that the place was now lost to me.

Since it no longer matters, I give up all pretenses and show them who I really am in all my glory. As my body expands, as my clothes rip from me, some of the bar patrons swoon, and I'm sure some probably expired right then and there. I let loose a laugh, but it's hollow. I know I'm going to miss the place.

As I leave for the last time, I try to cheer myself up, remembering reading in *People* magazine about a trendy new bar opening up recently in Los Angeles that will be a magnet for Hollywood's rich and famous. While I know it will be no Donlan's, I take solace that in my own way, I'll make it my home.

I turn, give Donlan's one last nod, and disappear into the night. ♠

PIT ON THE ROAD TO HELL

JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

When the telephone rang, I rolled over and squinted blearily in its general direction, my head swimming from too much whiskey the night before. What was this, Grand Central Station? I'd gotten more phone calls in the last week than I had in the entire previous year.

Cursing would-be friends and telemarketers under my breath, I fumbled for the handset. Though booze helped blunt the pain from my ruined legs, the side effects left a lot to be desired. My coordination was off, and I couldn't stop my hands from shaking.

Somehow, I got the receiver up to my ear.

"Who is this?" I rasped.

"Hello, Pit," said a too smooth voice.

I felt the blood drain from my face. Gulping hard, I sat up, nearly dropping the phone.

That voice belonged to Cal Tortelli—or Mr. Smith, as he now called himself. He ran an illegal gambling club outside Philadelphia. When an old college friend of mine fell victim to a blackmail scheme, I had manipulated Smith into handling the problem for us. I didn't know all the details, but I knew the resolution had been neither legal nor pretty for the blackmailers.

Unfortunately, Smith seemed to have taken a particular interest in me. He had researched my life, even going so far as to have my phone bugged. I seemed to intrigue him . . . probably due to my trick memory. I could recall every name, date, face, and fact that I had ever encountered.

"Hello, Mr. Smith," I said warily. "What do you want?"

"Don't you ever leave your apartment?" he asked with a low chuckle.

"I try not to. Walking hurts."

"Come outside. I need to see you."

"You're . . . here?"



"Yes." He paused. "And bring your toothbrush, 'Pit-bull' Peter Geller. You're going on a trip." He hung up.

With an uneasy feeling, I fumbled my phone back into its cradle. I really needed to get an answering machine and start screening calls. Mr. Smith was the last person I wanted to meet again . . . in my book, he ranked somewhere south of doctors and lawyers.

Bring a toothbrush? Why a toothbrush, but not a change of clothes?

No sense guessing. Throwing off my blanket, I hauled the hideously scarred pieces of flesh that now passed for my legs over the edge of the bed and, with a groan and several grunts, levered myself to a standing position. From the arches of my feet to the joints of my hips, I ached with a dull constant pain. Getting up was the worst part of any day.

I eyed the nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniel's on the pillow next to mine. Maybe one quick drink, just to steady my nerves? No, I had better not . . . Tortelli/Smith was a sharp man, and I'd need my head clear to deal with him.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced around my spartan bedroom: bed, dresser, nightstand, closet with shut doors. No pictures, no calendars, no clock—time doesn't mean much when you're waiting to die. Nothing had been moved; nobody had been inside while I slept.

I felt my attention starting to sharpen, all the little details leaping out at me. It had been an asset in college, a useful talent at work, but my always-racing, always-analyzing mind had pushed me to a nervous breakdown five years before. Thin blades of sunlight shining through the not-quite-closed blinds on the east-facing window meant late morning, somewhere around eleven o'clock. Not that the hour mattered; I only worked one day a month, when I made my regular pilgrimage to Atlantic City to win my monthly expenses at the gambling tables. Sometimes it helps to remember everything . . . like the number of aces and face cards played from an eight-deck blackjack shoe.

I had left my silver-handled walking stick leaning up against my night table. Using it, I limped into the kitchen. Four aspirin and a glass of orange juice made breakfast. Then I returned to my bedroom, where I dressed methodically in my last pair of clean pants, a blue-and-gold sweater, and worn leather loafers—all remnants from better days, when I had been a *wunderkind* at a Wall Street investment bank. But that had been before my nervous breakdown. And before my run-in with the taxi.

At the front door, I paused just long enough to pull on a Yankees cap and shrug on a windbreaker against the cool October weather. In an act of defiance, I deliberately forgot my toothbrush. Then,

taking a firm grip on my walking stick, I slowly limped into the hallway, then out to my building's tiny front porch.

A cold wind gusted, stirring leaves in the gutter. Lowering gray clouds threatened rain. A long black limousine with dark-tinted windows sat double-parked in front of my door, its powerful engine purring. The chauffeur—short but stocky, sporting a military-style haircut and dark sunglasses—opened the rear door and stood stiffly next to it, waiting for me to get in.

Three careful steps down, leaning heavily on the rail, and I reached the sidewalk. When I limped over to the limo, I noticed the bulge of a gun at the chauffeur's right armpit—which meant he was not only armed, but also left-handed. Just another useless detail I couldn't help but observe. My mind turned like a well-oiled machine now, noting everything around me and analyzing it.

Surreptitiously, I gave a quick glance up and down the block, but found no sign of life—everybody in my lower working-class neighborhood had already gone off to work or school or whatever else they did during the day—no witnesses to see my abduction.

Carefully, grimacing a bit, I lowered myself into the extra-roomy backseat and stretched out my legs. They hurt less that way.

Mr. Smith sat inside, dressed, as he had been the last time we met, in an impeccable Italian silk suit. He wore his short salt-and-pepper hair swept back, and the faint scent of lavender surrounded him. Against my better judgment, I eyed the two glasses in his hands with interest, amber liquid with faintly clinking cubes of ice. As the chauffeur closed the door firmly behind me, Smith passed me a drink. I gulped without hesitation, then made a face. Ginger ale.

"You spoiled perfectly good ice," I muttered.

"Alcohol kills brain cells, Pit. I want you at your best."

"Why?" I asked bluntly. My hands started to tremble again. As subtly as I could, I placed the glass into a holder in the door, spilling just a little.

"Because," he said, "I have a problem, and you can help me solve it." It wasn't a request; it was a statement.

Leaning forward, he tapped on the plastic partition separating us from the chauffeur, who had returned to the driver's seat. Slowly we accelerated. At the end of the block, we turned left, heading toward Roosevelt Boulevard.

I half grumbled, "Why does everyone think I'm some sort of freelance problem-solver?"

"Aren't you?"

"No!"

Smith chuckled again. "My aunt has a farm west of here. You're going to pay her a visit and keep an eye on things for a week or so.

She . . ." His voice trailed off. I couldn't read anything from his expression. "Someone—or something—may be stalking her."

"Some *thing*?" I asked.

"Well . . ." He shifted a tad uncomfortably. "She's claimed to see ghosts and angels as long as I can remember."

"Then she needs a psychiatrist, not a seedy drunken cripple!"

"Come on, Pit! You aren't seedy. Merely depressed."

"That makes me feel so much better," I grumbled sarcastically. Boy, had my stock fallen. From stopping blackmailers to babysitting crazy aunts.

"Actually," he went on, "I sent a couple of my boys out to visit her a month ago. They scared off a prowler one night, though I suppose it might have been a dog or even a coyote. It was dark; they couldn't tell. Anyway, after that, things got quiet. As soon as they left, though, Aunt Peck started reporting disturbances again."

I frowned. "What sort of disturbances?"

"Oh . . . noises at night, her possessions disappearing or moving around inside the house. That sort of thing. She thinks the spirit world is trying to communicate with her."

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you believe in these spirits?"

His eyes narrowed. "Let's say . . . I have an open mind. I've seen a lot of odd things over the years. And believe it or not, I used to be a choirboy. Growing up in the Catholic Church, you get a good strong dose of saints and miracles and superstition."

I snorted.

"You don't believe?" he asked.

"There are no ghosts, ghouls, zombies, vampires, werewolves, or angels prancing around farms in rural Pennsylvania!" I said it with absolute certainty.

"Then prove it!"

I looked out the window at the passing row houses. Laundry hung outside on tattered lines. Trash and graffiti spoke of a neighborhood heading downhill fast, just like my life. Suddenly I felt old and tired.

Angels . . .

Once upon a time, before my accident, so long ago it felt like someone else's life—once upon a time, when I was a good little boy, I had believed. But now . . .

Frowning, I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Did I really want to do this? Did I really want to babysit a delusional old lady?

It wasn't like Smith had given me a choice in the matter; we were already on the road, so I might as well make the best of it. Besides, maybe a change of scenery would be good. At least it would keep me from drinking myself to death for a little while longer.

Leaning back, I closed my eyes. "Tell me," I said, "everything you know about your aunt. Start with her name and family background."

"Don't you want to know about the disturbances?"

"No. You're a secondhand source of information. If I need to, I'll question her about them."

"Then you're going?"

My mind was racing ahead. Ghosts . . . farms . . . noises in the night . . .

I sighed. I shook my head.

But I said, "Yes."

Her name, said Smith, was Elizabeth Peck. She was his mother's sister-in-law: not a blood relative, but marriage meant a lot in his family. As long as he could remember, she had espoused the beneficial effects of fresh air and sunshine on children, and the Pecks' farm—a hundred or so acres just outside Hellersville—played host to a steady stream of young relatives throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Her husband Joshua had been a lay minister, so the country visits came with generous helpings of sermons . . . especially to the Tortelli boys, the black-sheep of the family.

After Uncle Peck's death two years ago, Aunt Peck began renting her land to neighbors, who planted soybeans, corn, and other crops. She made enough to pay her rather modest bills.

Aunt Peck had always been an avid correspondent, and she still kept in touch with all branches of her extended family through frequent letters. Her speculations about the nightly disturbances being caused by "angels" had alarmed Smith enough to send a couple of his men out to visit her.

Their first night on the farm, moaning sounds awakened them just after midnight. They ran outside, fired a couple of warning shots into the air, and heard someone—or something—run off through a cornfield. They gave chase, but whoever or whatever it was got away.

Then things got quiet. After another week, they left.

A few days later, Aunt Peck proudly wrote that the "angels" had returned. Hence Pit's summons.

"She may just be a crazy old lady," Smith said thoughtfully, "but she's my aunt, and I have to look out for her. Family duty, you understand."

Actually, I didn't. My parents were long dead, and I had never

been close to any of my other relatives. Uncle Mark's response to my taxi accident had been to send a "get well soon" card. And he forgot to sign it.

"I'm not sure," I said, "whether to be flattered or insulted."

"Flattered. You're my big gun, Pit."

I snorted. "Now you're being silly. But I can't go—I didn't pack my toothbrush, let alone a change of clothes. You'll have to take me home first."

"Nonsense. I know you don't take instructions well, so I took the liberty of having bags packed for you. Here."

Reaching into his pocket, he produced a set of miniature steel keys, the kind that fit suitcase locks. The tag dangling from the ring said, "My Other Car is a BMW."

"I didn't notice anything missing from my apartment," I said.

Mentally, I ran through the contents of my closet and sock drawer as I had seen them this morning. Everything had been exactly where it belonged.

"I purchased a new wardrobe for you, one better suited for farm life."

My eyebrows raised. "Oh?"

"Seven flannel shirts of assorted colors; one white and seven black undershirts; seven pairs of bluejeans, waist 28, inseam 30; one Sunday go-to-church suit, from your usual tailor—"

"I don't have a tailor, usual or otherwise," I said.

He tsk-tsked. "Perhaps you've forgotten your account at Paolo Versacci's on Vine Street." That was where I had bought an Armani suit before visiting his illegal gambling club. "You made quite an impression on Paolo. He still has your measurements on file."

It seemed Smith's research on me had been even more complete than I'd thought.

"One purchase does not make him my tailor," I grumbled. "Besides, I don't wear flannel. Or jeans. I find them too heavy and binding. And I don't believe in churches, so I won't need a Sunday suit."

"Show some flexibility."

"I don't have to. I'm a cripple, remember."

"That doesn't cut it. We run an equal-opportunity underworld these days, Pit. View your clothes as part of the job—a disguise, if you will. You'll need to blend in on the farm." Smith took a deep breath, then continued his inventory: "Heavy wool socks, underwear, light boots, windbreaker, baseball cap, pajamas, and of course, a shaving kit, complete with—you guessed it—a toothbrush."

"You seem to have thought of everything."

"Of course."

"Then how are you going to explain me to your aunt?"

I glimpsed a predator's teeth when he smiled. "We have a charity program at work, helping needy handicapped individuals rehabilitate themselves through clean air and sunshine. She's looking forward to your visit. And, of course, to the twenty-five dollar per diem my company is paying for your room and board."

"You're too generous," I said sarcastically. "But I suppose anything more than that would have roused her suspicions."

"Precisely. If she thought I sent you merely to give her some extra money, she never would have agreed."

Our car took the King of Prussia exit. I leaned forward, eyeing the landmarks. Lots of new buildings had appeared since the last time I had been here, some ten years before, back when I was a healthy college student.

Smith said, "You haven't asked what the job pays."

"It pays something?" Money had been the last thing on my mind.

"A hundred dollars a day, plus reimbursement for any expenses. That's yours just for showing up and keeping my aunt company for a week or two, no matter what happens."

"I don't want your money."

"But you'll take it."

"Do I have a choice?"

He smiled thinly and did not reply.

A few minutes later, we took an exit ramp, then turned into a gas station. Leaning forward slightly, I studied the limo's dashboard. The gas gauge showed nearly full. We weren't here to fuel up.

"This is my stop," Smith swung open his door. "I have businesses to run. And you have another two-and-a-half hours' drive ahead. Enjoy Hellersville . . . or, as my brothers and I used to call it, Hell!"

He slid out, and without preamble my chauffeur pulled into traffic and accelerated again. When I glanced over my shoulder, Smith raised two fingers to his forehead in salute. Then a new Burger King hid him from view.

Ten minutes later, we were on the Pennsylvania Turnpike heading west, surrounded by pleasantly monotonous trees and the occasional sprawling farm, complete with picture-perfect horses and cows. Traffic remained light. Little here could stimulate my overactive mind. I found it soothing.

With nothing better to do, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Flannel shirts . . . bluejeans . . . fresh air and sunshine . . . Hell indeed for a city boy like me.

What had I gotten myself into?



When the rhythm of the car abruptly changed, I jolted awake. We had taken an exit ramp.

According to the clock in the dashboard up front, almost three hours had passed since we left King of Prussia. The afternoon sunlight seemed too crisp, the rumble of wheels on pavement too sharp. My stomach growled faintly. Rubbing crusty-feeling eyes, I longed for a stiff drink. I had to press my hands against my thighs to keep them from shaking uncontrollably. God, I wanted to go home.

At the toll booth, the driver paid cash. Then we sped down a rural highway. Two turns later, we were on a narrow country road. Fields to either side had just been harvested, leaving a rough stubble of cut-down cornstalks. A pair of huge red harvesting machines sat idle.

As we drove, farm complexes broke the fields every half mile or so: old houses, ancient barns, silos, sheds, dogs and horses, and the occasional cow or sheep. At least they had garbage pickup; at the end of each driveway sat identical green plastic bins stenciled "Waste Management." A few driveways had bonus items out: a threadbare sectional sofa, a rusted old bicycle, piles of broken-down cardboard boxes neatly tied into bundles.

Then we turned onto a gravel driveway. In crooked letters, the battered metal mailbox said PECK-2040.

We had arrived. I sat up straighter, studying a large old barn with peeling red paint, three ancient silver silos, and a sprawling Victorian-style farmhouse that had seen better days. A clothesline running between ancient oaks held faded yellow sheets. To the left of the house, in a chicken wire pen, fifteen chickens scratched and strutted.

My chauffeur pulled up beside a pink Cadillac twenty years out of style, honked twice, then cut the engine. Immediately a plump, cheery-faced woman in a red-and-white checked dress burst from the house. She wore her gray hair up in a tight bun, and a smudge of white—flour?—dotted the tip of her nose. She had that pleasant, beaming expression I had always associated with grandmothers, and half against my will I found myself smiling back.

The chauffeur opened the door for me. I fumbled with my walking stick for a moment, then climbed out awkwardly.

"Hello!" I said through clenched teeth. I tried for a happy note, but it came out as a desperate croak. I had been sitting in one position too long; fierce stabbing pains shot through the length of my legs.

"Hello yourself!" she replied. I tried not to wince; she spoke at full volume. "Call me Aunt Peck—everyone does. You must be Mr. Geller? Pete? Petey?"

"My friends call me Pit, Aunt Peck." Not that I had any left, but Pit was several steps better than Petey.

"Lord above, what an interesting name! You must have quite a story to tell about it!"

"Not really—" I began.

She swept past me, all but bouncing with energy and enthusiasm. The chauffeur had opened the trunk. Without hesitation, Aunt Peck seized a blue leather suitcase and a matching garment bag, then started for the house.

"Come on, Pit!" she called over her shoulder. "I've got pies in the oven! Can't let 'em burn!"

I looked at the chauffeur. "I suppose it's too late to back out?"

"Sorry, pal," he said. "Orders."

I nodded. You didn't contradict a man like Mr. Smith. Leaning heavily on my walking stick, I limped after Aunt Peck.

She was a talker—I'll say that much for her. As I sat at the kitchen table and worked on a slab of hot-from-the-oven apple pie topped with freshly whipped cream, she kept up a nonstop monologue about everything under the sun, except angelic visitors: the farm, her late husband Joshua, the city kids who had just moved in next door.

"City kids?" I prompted. New neighbors explained all the cardboard boxes out for trash pickup.

"Nick and Debby," she said. "You'll meet them tomorrow. I always invite neighbors over for Saturday dinner. It makes things a little less lonely. Of course, now that you're here . . ."

I nodded encouragingly. "Have they been here long, Nick and Debby?"

"Oh, a bit over a month, I guess. Maybe two."

"Ah." I ate my last bite of pie. My hands kept shaking, but Aunt Peck either didn't notice or marked it down to my accident.

How closely did the new neighbors' arrival coincide with the disturbances? Could they be trying to scare her off her land? Pennsylvania had its share of natural resources . . . what could make her land valuable enough to steal? Oil, perhaps?

"I was wondering," I said, wiping my mouth carefully on a napkin, "if you have well water?"

"Of course. Why?"

"In the late 1800s, my many-times-great-grandfather had a

farm in Pennsylvania. He gave up on it and moved to Ohio because every time he tried to dig a well, it filled up with black oily stuff."

She laughed; everyone who heard it always did. According to family legend, it had really happened. And Marilyn Monroe used to babysit my father and uncle too, before she got famous.

Aunt Peck said, "I bet your family has been kicking themselves ever since automobiles came along!"

"Yes." I shook my head ruefully. "I guess you don't have that problem here, though."

"Oil companies poked around in '75 or '76, doing all sorts of surveys, but apparently there's nothing under Hellersville but water."

Strike one theory.

"Surely the town has something going for it . . ." I said. "Mines? Silver? Gold?"

"Well, there used to be a quarry. They made gravel, I think, but then it filled with water. It's been a lake for nearly fifty years now. All Hellersville produces is produce." She gave a wink. "But wait till you taste my tomatoes; they're as big as softballs and sweet as anything! And my watermelons!" She laughed heartily.

Strike a second theory. If the land had no intrinsic value, why would anyone want to scare her off her farm?

After I finished my pie, Aunt Peck offered to show me my room. She retrieved my bags from the hallway, where she had left them while we checked her pies, then skirted the narrow stairs (which I had been dreading) and headed down a wide hallway. The floorboards creaked loudly as we walked. No one would be able to sneak up on us during the night.

We reached a cluttered family room. The sofa, wingbacked chairs, and ottoman all had plastic over the upholstery. Books, curios, and photos crammed the built-in shelves and the stand-alone bookcases. A small TV sat next to the fireplace.

We passed through into another small hallway, then came to a small bedroom at the back of the house. It had one window, which looked out across fields stubbled from recently harvested corn. To the left, I saw the edge of her garden—tomato and pepper plants.

I nodded approvingly at the single bed with a white quilt and two fluffy pillows. It looked a lot like my bed back in Philadelphia. A threadbare oval rug, made of tiny triangles of randomly chosen fabric set in a spiral pattern, covered much of the floor. An oak dresser and a battered old armoire completed the furnishings.

As she set the bags on the bed, I straightened the pictures on the walls: three faded black-and-white photographs showing children

standing in armylike formations before this same farmhouse. Smiling girls wore knee-length dresses with bows in their hair; boys wore short pants and shirts with buttons, their hair buzzed so close they almost looked bald. The men behind them all wore white shirts with dark ties, and the women wore plain dresses. Dates written in the lower corners said July 13, 1961, July 8, 1962, and July 14, 1963. They had to commemorate the family gatherings Mr. Smith had disliked so much.

That would make Smith one of the boys. I studied their faces, but couldn't pick him out; nearly identical clothes, haircuts, and sun-tans made him blend in among the others. Smith's father, though, stood out among the men—shorter and darker than the others, leaner, with a somewhat sinister look in his eyes. A younger, rougher version of Mr. Smith.

"You used to have a lot of guests," I said to Aunt Peck. "Where did you put them all?"

"Oh, we put the boys in the barn—plenty of room in the hayloft—and the girls slept in the family room. We had six bedrooms upstairs for the adults."

"I was an only child. It must have been great to have so many family members together."

"Oh, it was wonderful." She sighed, eyes distant. "Those were the days." Then she brightened. "Do you want me to unpack your things?"

"No, thank you. I can manage. I try to be self-reliant."

"My Joshua was the same way, God rest his soul." She started back for the kitchen. "I'll start supper. Give a holler if you need anything."

"Thanks."

I spent the next half hour unpacking. Everything Mr. Smith had purchased looked like it would fit me. With careful precision, I opened packages of socks and then refolded the contents, placing each garment neatly and precisely in the dresser drawers. Next, I meticulously removed all the tags from my new shirts and hung them in the armoire. Jeans didn't need hangers, so I stacked them in the bottom.

Mindless activities let my racing mind slow down. For a few minutes, I could forget Aunt Peck's problems and concentrate solely on the here and now.

The last things in the suitcase turned out to be a tiny cell phone and a small but powerful flashlight, batteries already installed. I turned on the phone and checked the list of numbers. Speed-dial had been preprogrammed with two numbers:

Smith. 001

Fast help 002

Smith really had thought of everything. I switched it off and put both phone and flashlight in the front of my sock drawer.

Next, I opened the garment bag. My new suit turned out to be a Joseph Abboud original, gray with pinstripes, one hundred percent wool—practical and conservative enough not to stand out in a rural farming community. Mr. Smith had good taste, if nothing else. I hung it up, then put my bags on top of the armoire. I made one last pass over the room, straightening the dresser slightly, lowering the shade so it covered the window latch, and picking a few bits of lint from the bed's white quilt.

Finally, I opened the window and peered out. Now I could see the whole of Aunt Peck's garden, and I had to admit it was impressive: a rectangle perhaps thirty feet long and sixty wide, enclosed with chicken wire and planted with peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, and quite a few other vegetables I couldn't identify at this distance. Other than the garden and a couple of shade trees, the land around the farmhouse had been cleared for more than two hundred yards in every direction. Nobody could sneak up on the house—or, having gotten here, escape unseen the way the last prowler had.

I made my way back toward the kitchen, straightening pictures along the way, examining rooms with greater attention. The books in the family room seemed to be a mix of espionage novels and religious nonfiction. Family photos showed Aunt Peck and a man I took to be Joshua with five children and in a variety of settings, from Disneyworld to Hershey Park. I committed the position of every item in every room to memory. If these alleged angels moved or made off with anything, I would notice.

The plastic covers on the sofa and chairs had tiny pinprick indentations—probably cat claws, since cat hair in several different colors speckled the throw pillows.

Then, as I made my way toward the kitchen, I heard voices. Visitors? I strained to hear but couldn't make out the words.

As quietly as I could, I crept up the hallway and peeked around the corner. Aunt Peck had her back to me as she stirred something on the stove—soup or stew, from the smell. An old man in coveralls sat at the kitchen table nursing a mug of coffee. He looked at least seventy, maybe older: thinning white hair, weather-beaten skin, rough callused hands.

“—ought to be ripped out and replaced,” he was saying. “Wouldn't take more'n a day or two, and you wouldn't have to

worry about the termite damage. Can't have you fallin' through the floor."

"I don't have the money right now," said Aunt Peck. "It will have to wait."

As his fingers curled tightly around his white coffee mug, I noticed that the little finger and ring finger of his right hand were both missing their last joints.

"Wouldn't cost more'n a couple hundred for lumber, Bessie. A wise investment, if you ask me. Happy to throw in the labor for free, just to keep you safe."

"Maybe next year."

"Suit yourself. But the damage ain't goin' to go away."

"I know, Joe." She sighed. "But my heart just isn't into keeping things up anymore. Joshua used to handle all that."

Joe frowned. "You do what you can, Bessie. You do what you can."

He drained his mug and shoved back his chair. "I better get goin'. My boy and I can fix the barn tomorrow afternoon. Just needs a few new shingles, and I have plenty at home."

"Thanks, Joe."

Then, to my shock, she gave him a kiss—not a casual peck, but a downright passionate smooch—and he returned it heartily, along with a squeeze that made her squeal. Clearly the old folks had some friskiness left inside.

Joe left through the side door, which led into the yard facing the barn. After it slammed shut, I counted to ten, then limped into the kitchen.

"I heard voices," I said. Through the door's window, I watched Joe climb into a battered blue Ford truck and slowly drive away.

"Joe Carver stopped by." Aunt Peck nodded as she stirred her pot. "He's worked on the farm since the day we moved in here. The hardest thing I ever had to do was let him go when Joshua passed. He and his boy still do all the little jobs I can't handle."

"Ah," I said. I picked up both coffee mugs and carried them carefully to the sink. Aunt Peck hadn't stirred hers well enough; a thick white residue of sugar remained on the bottom when I poured out the dregs. "Does he live around here too?"

"He has a little house in Hellersville. His wife kept it cute as a button till she got sick last spring. This was the first year they didn't plant new flowers." She shook her head. "Poor dear. She passed just after Joshua."

Two old friends who had lost their spouses. No wonder they felt drawn to each other.



At dinner, my hands shook so badly I could barely eat. I spilled all the water from my glass twice, soaking myself and the table. I apologized profusely as I wiped at everything with my napkin.

"Land sakes, it's just water, Pit!" said Aunt Peck with a laugh. She fetched a towel from the kitchen and mopped up. "After five babies and Joshua's passing, a little spilled water isn't going to bother me!"

"You're very kind," I said miserably. *Stop shaking, stop shaking!* I pressed both hands together in my lap, but it didn't help. My body wouldn't cooperate. What I needed was a drink. Did Joshua keep a supply of booze in the house? Probably not; he had been a minister, after all.

Aunt Peck returned to her seat and began to eat her stew again—a thick one full of beef, carrots, and potatoes, just the way I liked it.

"You must be wondering what happened to me," I said, as I struggled with my fork. With effort, I managed to spear a carrot and get it into my mouth without impaling myself.

"Do you feel like talking about it . . . ?"

"I don't mind." I half shrugged and put my fork down. Eating wasn't worth the effort tonight. "I used to work on Wall Street. I got a plum job right out of college, but I had a nervous breakdown from working twenty-hour days seven days a week. After six months of treatment, when I finally began to pull myself together again, a taxi ran a red light and hit me. I spent an hour pinned under its front wheels, and I almost lost my legs. I spent another six months in rehab . . . and I just haven't been the same since."

"I'm so sorry, Pit." She touched my hand gently. "I'll pray for you."

I didn't particularly want her sympathy—what's done is done. No use crying over it or hoping for miracles that would never come—but she said it in such a heartfelt way that I couldn't help but feel touched.

"Thank you," I said.

After dinner, she invited me to watch game shows with her, and to my surprise, I accepted. I used to find game shows annoying and contrived. But now, tonight, it was almost . . . comforting . . . to have someone with whom I could sit in silence, someone who made no demands on my intellect or time or will to live.

Jeopardy! had three really bad contestants; even the returning champion flubbed answer after answer. The host, struggling to put a positive spin on things, quipped that tonight's questions must be harder than usual.

"That's not the problem, Alex," I couldn't help but blurt out. "You picked idiots to play."

"Can you do better?" Aunt Peck asked with a yawn. I think she had been watching me more than the television.

"It's always easier when you're at home." I forced a laugh. But then I proceeded to come up with questions for every single answer on *Jeopardy!*—and for the final answer, I came up with not just two, but all seven members of the United Arab Emirates. None of the players got it right. The least unskillful of the three—or perhaps the most cunning—had only risked a dollar and won the day, complete with a laughably small \$1,200 jackpot.

"That was amazing, Pit!" Aunt Peck said, staring at me in awe. "You should go on TV. You'd win a fortune!"

"I don't think I can stand long enough to play. And besides, I don't like to travel. It took a lot of arm-twisting to get me out here!"

"I imagine Cal can be quite persuasive." She smiled wistfully, eyes distant, remembering. "The Tortellis were always that way."

"Cal is quite something." How much did she know about him? Somehow, I suspected she had no idea he ran an illegal casino.

"Oh, Cal's a kitten. Best of the lot. Be glad you never met his father. There was a man who, well, I shouldn't speak ill of the dead." She paused. "But when Bruno wanted something, he got it, no matter what."

"Was he in organized crime?"

"What makes you ask that?" she said sharply.

"Something Cal once said."

"I don't know for sure. He kept his business to himself, at least around me. But Joshua always said he was some sort of gangster. When the police found him dead in the trunk of a car, that clinched it for us."

"How long ago did that happen?"

"Well, let's see . . . it must have been 1963, early August, I think. He had been shot with a single bullet to the head."

"It must have been hard on his family," I said. To my surprise, I found I had a lump in my throat. I remembered my own father's death from pancreatic cancer. It had been devastating to Mom and me; she had never recovered from it.

"Yes. Yes, it was. But the Lord gives and the Lord takes—maybe it was for the best. At least Cal and the other boys didn't follow their father into a life of crime, so something good came of it."

She yawned, covering her mouth with a plump-fingered hand. "Oh, excuse me!"

"Quite all right. I'm tired, too." Farm people went to bed early, I reminded myself. "If you don't mind, I think I'll turn in."

"Me too." She yawned again, then stood unsteadily. I reached up and steadied her arm. "I can barely keep my eyes open!"

Once Aunt Peck disappeared up the stairs, I prowled through the house, doing a quick security check. She had left all three outside doors unlocked, so I locked them. None had deadbolts or chains, unfortunately; they all should have been replaced with steel-core security doors years ago. The basement door had a simple hook and eye; nothing I could do about it now, so I left it alone.

Next, I examined all the windows. Not one single lock had been turned, so I did it myself. Perhaps they didn't believe in burglars out here. Or perhaps they didn't have much worth stealing.

Returning to my bedroom, I opened my window about three inches. A cool wind began to billow the curtains. If angels or ghosts wanted in tonight, they would have to get past me.

I did not undress. Instead, I lay on top of the quilt, listening to the unfamiliar noises around me. Houses have their own rhythms: the creaks, the squeaks, the little settling sounds. When the furnace suddenly kicked on with a *whump*, I jumped so much, I almost fell out of bed.

A little later, raccoons or possums or some other beasts I had never heard before began to yowl and hiss in the yard. Mating? Fighting? Slaughtering the chickens? I had no way of knowing. Since Aunt Peck didn't come running down from her bedroom in a panic, I assumed the racket fell into the "typical farm sound" category.

Then I heard a low but steady *crunch-crunch-crunch*. Tires on gravel. The vehicle was moving very, very slowly toward the house.

Rising as fast as I could, I grabbed my phone and flashlight and went down the creaking hallway, through the family room, and into the parlor, just to the right of the front door. Peering around the drapes, I gazed into the front yard. A large, dark vehicle rolled up to the house and glided to a stop. No headlights showed, and when the driver opened the door, no cab light came on. Could this be Aunt Peck's angel?

The driver went around back and got something out of the bed of his truck, then carried it toward the house. The breath caught in my throat as heavy footsteps sounded on the steps, then the porch.

I hobbled around to the front door and flipped all the switches on the wall. The porch and the hallway flooded with light. Through the

little window set in the front door, I saw Joe Carver's startled face, then heard a metallic crash as he dropped something heavy.

"Bessie?" he called. He tried the door handle, but it was locked. He jiggled it.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Who are you?" he called. Rather than run away, as I'd half expected, he began to pound on the door. "Bessie? Are you okay in there? Open up!"

"Stop that!" I said.

"Open up!" he shouted. "Bessie? Bessie?"

Those weren't the actions of a prowler. I fumbled with the lock and opened the door.

"Who the hell are *you*?" Joe demanded, staring at me. The loud crashing noise had been his tool kit. He had dropped it when I turned on the lights.

"I'm Peter Geller," I said, leaning heavily on my walking stick. "I'm visiting Aunt Peck for the week. Now who the hell are you?"

Joe looked me up and down. I guess I didn't strike him as dangerous or threatening—me, thin as a rail, eyes limned with dark circles, looking closer to sixty than my true age of thirty—because he didn't try to tear me to pieces. Which he probably could have done with very little effort.

"You one of her nephews?" he demanded. He took a step forward, face cycling through anger and puzzlement. "She didn't say nothing about you comin'."

"It must have slipped her mind," I said. "She didn't say anything about expecting burglars, either!"

"I'm not a burglar!"

"You could have fooled me, sneaking around like that!"

His fists balled up; he seemed about to take my head off. I shifted uneasily. Maybe I had chosen the wrong approach. He wasn't responding well to confrontation.

"Say," I said, pretending to study his features. Time to change tactics—and fast. "Don't I know you? You're Joe Carver, right?"

"Huh." He squinted hard at my face, but seemed to draw a blank. "How do you know me?"

"We met years ago," I lied. "I was just a kid, and I didn't have *this*." I raised my walking stick.

"Huh," he said again.

I peered around him at his truck. "I heard you come up the drive, but your headlights were off. That's why I thought you were a burglar."

"I was trying not to wake Bessie," he said. He frowned. "Termites been eatin' into the dinin' room floor. I need to replace it or she's

gonna fall through and break a leg. Maybe worse. She wouldn't let me do it, so I thought I'd come by tonight and get started. Once the floor's up, she'll have to let me finish."

He had the lines down so well, he must have practiced them. Smiling, I swung the front door fully open.

"Come in, Mr. Carver. I'm sorry if I was rude, but you scared the bejesus out of me. I wasn't expecting anyone. And you have to admit a cripple like me can't exactly defend the house. You understand."

"Uh-huh."

I glanced over my shoulder at the stairs, brow furrowing. "And I'm surprised Aunt Peck's not up, considering all the racket we've made."

"Bessie sleeps like a log." He said it a little too fast. "Don't fret yourself about her. Early to bed, early to rise."

Mental alarms went off. Hard work and country air might make someone tired. But nobody could have slept through the crash of his dropped toolbox or the shouting we'd done at each other. No, Aunt Peck should have been down here in a flash to investigate.

Then I remembered the white sludge in the bottom of her coffee mug. I had taken it for sugar. But it could have been something else—some drug to make her sleep, so Joe could get in here and do . . . what? Haunt the place?

"Well, at least *someone's* tired," I said with a chuckle. I had to put him at ease and get away long enough to check on Aunt Peck. "I'm going to have to take my pain pills to get to sleep tonight."

"Yeah," he said. "You should do that."

I nodded and smiled. "If you don't mind, I'm going to turn in. Good night, Mr. Carver."

"Good night." He picked up his toolbox, then pushed past me into the dining room.

I limped with deliberate noisiness down the hallway—a shuffling step, then a tap of my walking stick, then another shuffling step, the another tap, floorboards creaking underfoot all the time. Halfway to my room, I heard a slight noise behind me, and I could feel his eyes following my every move. I hoped he found my performance convincing.

Without a backward glance, I entered my room and shut the door. Then, so slowly it hurt, I counted to a hundred. When I peeked out, he had gone back to doing whatever mischief he had come to do.

I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open. Number 002 on the speed dial list still said "Fast help," but what did that mean—police? FBI? Mob hitmen? I needed muscle, and I needed it fast. Despite his affection for Aunt Peck, I didn't exactly feel safe with Joe in the house.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed button 2. On the first ring, a man picked up and said in a gravelly voice, "Smith's office."

"This is Peter Geller. I need someone here. Fast."

"Five minutes," he said and hung up.

Five minutes. I could last that long.

Slowly, I eased myself out into the hallway, closed the door silently behind me, and crept up the hallway toward the narrow stairs. I placed my feet as close to the wall as I could, hoping the floorboards wouldn't squeak. Tiptoeing along that way, without using my walking stick really hurt; I put too much weight on the balls of my feet, and the shooting pains it caused brought tears to my eyes.

But it worked. The floorboards remained silent.

When I passed the door to the dining room, Joe had his back to me. He had rolled up half the rug and was examining the floorboards. Looking for termite damage? Somehow, I doubted it.

I reached the staircase. Cautiously, I placed my foot on the first step. The stairs had barely squeaked when Aunt Peck went up them at bedtime. I estimated my own weight at seventy to eighty pounds less than hers, so I anticipated little trouble. Grasping the railing, I hauled myself up an inch at a time. Three steps and not a sound. Six steps, halfway there. Eight steps and I knew I'd make it.

I paused at the top landing. The door to Aunt Peck's room stood open. Dim light spilled in from the hallway, and I could just make out her queen-sized bed and several bulky pieces of furniture. I flipped on the overhead lights and went in.

She lay on top of her quilt, still wearing that red-and-white checked dress. She hadn't had a chance to put on her nightgown. She had just collapsed, unconscious or dead.

"Aunt Peck?" I called softly.

From below, ancient nails groaned as they pulled free from a board. By the sounds, Joe hadn't been lying: he really was pulling up the floor.

"Aunt Peck?" I called again, louder.

When she still didn't respond, I limped over and shook her shoulder. Nothing. Her forehead glistened faintly with perspiration. When I touched her carotid artery, she had a fast, fluttery heartbeat.

No more than two or three minutes had passed since I'd called Smith's office for help. How fast would Hellersville's EMS respond to a 911 call? Who would get here first?

Taking a deep breath, I dialed 911. I couldn't risk an old woman's life.

"Emergency services," said a tinny voice.

"I need an ambulance," I said.

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"I have an old woman here who's unconscious. Possible drug overdose. I don't know what she took."

"What is your location?"

I gave the address. "How long will it take to get someone here?"

"I have already alerted the police, sir. They should arrive shortly. Can you remain on the line?"

Behind me, I heard a voice say, "What are you doing?"

A chill swept through me. I whirled and found Joe Carver silhouetted in the doorway. With two quick strides, he reached me and ripped the cell phone from my hand.

"Aunt Peck—" I began.

"You leave her be!" He raised his fist to strike me, face drawing back in rage.

Then the doorbell rang. A second later someone began to pound on the door. The cavalry had arrived. Far off, I heard the wail of an ambulance's siren.

Joe hesitated, then lowered his fist. He looked over his shoulder, clearly uneasy.

"The police are here," I said in a soothing voice. "You better run down and let them in. I think Aunt Peck had a stroke."

"A—a stroke?" He gaped at me.

"Please let them in!" I let a note of urgency creep into my voice. "We have to get her to a hospital!"

The cell phone in his hand began to ring. I reached out and plucked it from his fingers.

"Go!" I said, pointing at the stairs. "Let them in!"

He turned and thundered down the steps. I heard him babbling to the police about how poor old Bessie must have had a stroke, how they needed to get her to a hospital.

Then I answered the cell phone: "Peter Geller."

"You've got cops there," said the man with the gravelly voice. "We drove past. What do you want me to do?"

"Circle around. Come in quietly as soon as they're gone."

"Anything else?"

"Call Smith and tell him to get out here fast. It's important."

"Got it." He hung up.

I stuck the phone in my pocket as two uniformed police officers came bounding up the stairs carrying medical cases. Both cops looked young, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, with close-shaved heads and plenty of muscles bulging beneath their uniforms. One started taking Aunt Peck's blood pressure while the other did a circuit of the room, scooping vials of pills from her dresser into a plastic bag.

"You phoned it in?" the cop asked me. Pulling out a stethoscope and a blood pressure cuff, he started to take Aunt Peck's blood pressure. "Do you know what's wrong with her?"

Over his shoulder, I read Aunt Peck's blood pressure: 160 over 90. Much too high.

"Yes, I know what's wrong." My gaze flickered over to Joe Carver, standing in the doorway wringing his hands. "It's a drug overdose."

"Why do you think so?"

"I noticed a white residue in her coffee mug. I think there were pills in it."

"A—a stroke!" Joe said. His face had gone bone white. "You said it was a stroke!"

"No, it wasn't a stroke."

"Where is the coffee mug?" the first cop asked.

"She washed it."

The second cop said, "Besides the ones here, do you know of any other pills she might have taken?"

"No." Again I looked at Joe, but he volunteered nothing.

The ambulance's siren cut off as it pulled into the farm's driveway; I could see its flashing lights through the drawn shades. The police officer who had collected the pills pushed past Joe and jogged down the stairs to show them in.

Two minutes later, they had Aunt Peck in a stretcher and carried her down. All the fuss and attention seemed to have finally penetrated her stupor. She half opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Angels . . ." she whispered.

Maybe that's where all her visitations had come from—drug-induced dreams. Which meant Joe had dosed her before. All the pieces of the puzzle were falling neatly into place. Everything except why.

When I patted her arm gently, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

"Where will they take her?" I asked the police.

"County hospital," the first officer said. "It's the closest. Don't worry, they'll take good care of her."

"I should go too," muttered Joe. "Bessie . . ."

"No," I said firmly. "You aren't family. The hospital won't let you in." Pointedly, I added, "Besides, you've done quite enough for Aunt Peck already."

Joe stared at me, eyes glittering with hatred. "Then you should go."

"I'd love to, but I'm not family, either."

"But you said—"

I smiled sweetly. "I lied."

Just then the first police officer returned and asked for my name. I told him the truth, and he wrote it down. Then he did the same to Joe. A little sullenly, Joe told him.

Joe and I stood side by side on the front porch, watching in silence as first the ambulance and then the police car peeled away—the ambulance with its lights flashing, the police dark but close behind.

"I ought to kill you," Joe Carver announced.

"That would not be wise." I shifted uncomfortably, leaning heavily on my walking stick. "We're about to have company. Very powerful and very *mean* company who won't like what you did to Aunt Peck. And then we're going to find the money."

It was a stab in the dark, but his response told me I'd guessed right.

"How do you know about the money?" he gasped out.

"I work for Bruno Tortelli's son."

Joe sagged, all the fight gone out of him. He sat on the porch steps and began to sob quietly.

Just as he managed to compose himself, a black car pulled into the driveway, tires crunching on the gravel. It parked beside the pink Cadillac, and two stocky men in dark suits climbed out. Both carried handguns in shoulder holsters.

"Mr. Geller?" asked the driver.

"That's me," I said. "Is Mr. Smith coming?"

"Yes."

"Excellent." I turned and limped toward the front door. "Let's wait inside. My feet are killing me. Oh, and don't let Mr. Carver leave."

The mantel clock showed 3:10 when I heard another car pull up in the yard. One of the guards got up to check. He returned a moment later with Mr. Smith.

"This had better be good," Smith said, even before I'd managed to pull myself to my feet. He looked tired and rumped and unhappy at being dragged out here.

"I think you'll be pleased," I said.

He folded his arms. "Proceed."

"Surely you remember Joe Carver from your childhood days here." I indicated Joe with a nod of my head.

Smith frowned. "The handyman?"

"Correct. But this story starts in 1963. Your father stole some money and brought it out here. Somehow, he talked Reverend Peck into holding onto it for him. Together they hid it inside the house. I believe Joe can corroborate that part of the story. Joe?"

"Yeah," Joe said sullenly. "That's what happened."

"Unfortunately," I went on, "your father was killed before he could return for it. And Reverend Peck refused to touch the money because it was stolen."

"Go on," said Smith, looking interested.

I said, "Decades passed. Somehow Joe heard about the money—"

"Joshua was dyin'," said Joe Carver. "Out of his head, just babblin'. He thought I was Bruno Tortelli, and he began arguin' with me. Said he couldn't keep the money here. Said he wanted it gone before Bessie found out."

I continued, "So that's when Joe decided to take the money for himself. His wife died sick—it probably left him deep in debt. He wanted to clear himself so he could remarry. I'm sure he had the best motives."

"Where does my aunt fit into this?" Mr. Smith asked.

"She doesn't believe in locking doors or windows," I said. "Joe has been coming at night and searching for the money, but he hasn't found it. She attributed the noises and disturbances to ghosts and angels. Now Joe thinks it may be hidden under the floorboards. This afternoon, he drugged your aunt—probably with one of the medicines his wife used to take—and he came out tonight planning to rip up the floorboards."

Smith looked around. "Where is Aunt Peck?"

"In the hospital. I found her drugged, so I called an ambulance. She's a strong old girl; she'll be fine."

"She better be." Smith gave Joe a dark look. "If anything happens to her . . ."

"Right now," I said, "I think we should look for the money. I'm willing to bet Joe got it right. It's under the floor. But not in the dining room."

"Where, then?" said Joe.

"Did you notice," I said to Joe, "that the steps to the second floor don't squeak?"

"No. But what of it?"

"In a house this old, the steps *should* squeak. All the other floorboards do. I think someone took the staircase apart and put it back together more firmly. And someone has been giving the steps extra attention over the years to keep them in tip-top shape."

"All this time . . ." Joe muttered. "All this time, and I never even suspected!"

"Of course, I could be wrong." I pulled myself to my feet. "Mr. Smith, shall we have a look?"

"Certainly!"

Joe Carver fetched a crowbar from his toolbox and brought it to

the staircase. He hunted around the first step, looking for the right spot, then deftly inserted the thin end of the crowbar and pried.

With a groan, the nails pulled free. Then the step popped up . . . and in a dusty little hole under the first step, I spotted three dusty canvas bags. Each had been stenciled with "Manhattan Federal Trust" in dark blue letters.

Smith pushed Joe aside, took out the bags, and dumped neat stacks of twenty-dollar bills wrapped in paper bands onto the floor. Fifty-five bundles of bills—not so much these days, but in 1963 it would have been a fortune.

Smith tossed me one of the stacks. I flipped through the bills slowly: fifty of them, exactly one thousand dollars.

"The serial numbers are non-sequential," I observed. "This money has been circulated. And there are a few gold certificates in here. They may be worth more to collectors than the face value of the bills." I tossed the bundle back onto the pile. "Probably safe to spend."

"Dad knew his stuff," Mr. Smith said.

"What are we going to do with it?" Joe asked him. "Divide it up?"

"Return it to its rightful owner," said Smith.

Of course, he meant himself. But Joe didn't know that.

"Is there a reward?" Joe asked, sounding desperate. He licked his lips. "Maybe . . . a finder's fee?"

Smith frowned. "Trying to steal from my aunt was a stupid thing to do. Drugging her was worse. This—" He sneered at the money. "This is nothing. It's hardly worth my time. But to protect my family—my flesh and blood—I would happily give ten times as much."

He nodded to his men. They grabbed Joe's arms in vice-like grips. Joe yelled in sudden panic as he realized how things had suddenly turned against him.

Smith smiled at me. "Once again, Pit, I'm impressed. You gave me more than I expected. Now, please wait in my car. This won't take long."

I swallowed hard. I had a very bad feeling inside.

Carefully, Smith took off his coat, folded it neatly, and set it onto the hall table. Then he removed his cufflinks and slipped them into his pants pocket. Slowly he began to roll up his sleeves.

"You won't kill him," I said.

"Not as long as my aunt recovers."

I nodded. I understood, even if Joe didn't. Family came first with Mr. Smith.

"One more thing you should know," I said.

"What's that?"

"As long as you're keeping it in the family . . . Joe is going to be your uncle. Your aunt is in love with him."

Then I turned and walked out. Mr. Smith's chauffeur had been waiting for me; he held the door open, and I slid into the back seat to wait.

About five minutes later, the two goons came out, looking unhappy. They got into their car and drove away. A few minutes later, Mr. Smith came out. He had put his coat back on. And he didn't look happy.

He got in next to me, then motioned for the driver to proceed. We pulled out of the driveway and headed back for the turnpike. He opened the little compartment with the martini glass on it and poured himself a glass of ginger ale.

"Want some, Pit?"

"No."

He took a long drink. "You must be wondering," he finally said, "what happened inside."

"I assume you gave him a wedding present," I said, "and welcomed him to the family."

Smith hadn't carried the money out. I would have noticed something that bulky.

"We also set a wedding date," Mr. Smith said, frowning. "He has a month to get his affairs in order. And he knows what will happen if he ever steps out of line again."

I leaned back with a half smile. "There's still the matter of my fee. For twelve hours' work, you owe me fifty bucks. I'll take it in chips next time I visit your casino."

"I think," said Mr. Smith slowly, studying me, "that you might be the most dangerous man I've ever met, Pit."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said. Then I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep.

My legs hurt less that way. 🦋

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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 203. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the September issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Lout	116	112	131	55	123	180	14	98	93	9
B. Executive locus: 2 wds.	96	166	199	158	115	7	88	22	128	53
C. City on the Tagus River	182	69	113	16	83	119				
D. Charismatic leader, perhaps	42	130	62	19	92	192	188	4		
E. Stalemates	103	31	187	80	78	170	13	194		
F. Steered	90	177	110	18	139	206	144	56	33	
G. Portrait eponym	125	152	122	47	25	195	6	129	142	167
H. Wowed	150	50	35	74	164	159				
I. Ivy League burg: 2 wds.	168	162	101	117	48	2	210	138		
J. Thwart	52	41	30	89	72	97	109	127	184	201
K. Ice-cream quaff: 2 wds.	79	44	70	186	121	49	147	135	37	212
L. Northern territorial capital	207	34	76	71	8	160	27	153	105	84 157
M. Peer parcels	111	91	21	51	114	173	197			
N. Western snares	178	46	148	11	169	29				
O. Cabaret, maybe: 2 wds.	87	73	172	205	32	134	57	17	181	5
P. Impress	156	45	179	191	204	211	54	136	165	
Q. Casual summerwear: 2 wds.	66	118	141	190	95	23	40			

1	U	2	I	3	X	4	D		5	O	6	G	7	B	8	L	9	A	10	Y		11	N	12	W	13	E		
		14	A	15	W	16	C	17	O	18	F	19	D	20	T	21	M	22	B	23	Q	24	V		25	G	26	Y	
		27	L	28	U	29	N	30	J			31	E	32	O			33	F	34	L	35	H	36	T	37	K	38	S
		39	X	40	Q	41	J	42	D	43	W	44	K	45	P	46	N			47	G	48	I	49	K			50	H
51	M	52	J	53	B			54	P			55	A	56	F	57	O	58	V	59	R	60	Y	61	T	62	D		
63	W	64	V	65	U	66	Q			67	X	68	S	69	C	70	K	71	L			72	J	73	O	74	H	75	T
76	L	77	X	78	E			79	K	80	E	81	Y	82	V			83	C	84	L			85	R	86	T	87	O
		88	B	89	J	90	F	91	M			92	D	93	A			94	X	95	Q	96	B	97	J	98	A	99	R
100	U			101	I	102	U	103	E	104	R	105	L	106	S	107	W			108	R	109	J	110	F	111	M	112	A
113	C			114	M	115	B			116	A	117	I	118	Q	119	C	120	X	121	K	122	G			123	A	124	V
125	G			126	W	127	J	128	B	129	G	130	D	131	A	132	V			133	T	134	O	135	K	136	P	137	Y
138	I	139	F			140	S	141	Q	142	G	143	W			144	F	145	Y	146	S			147	K	148	N	149	U
150	H	151	T	152	G	153	L	154	R			155	T	156	P	157	L	158	B	159	H			160	L	161	V	162	I
163	Y	164	H			165	P	166	B	167	G	168	I			169	N			170	E	171	W	172	O	173	M	174	T
175	Y	176	S	177	F	178	N			179	P	180	A	181	O	182	C	183	R			184	J	185	T	186	K		
187	E	188	D	189	V	190	Q			191	P	192	D			193	X			194	E	195	G	196	V	197	M	198	W
199	B	200	U	201	J	202	X	203	R	204	P			205	O	206	F	207	L	208	V	209	W	210	I	211	P	212	K

R. Accelerated

85 203 59 104 99 108 154 183

S. Barbara Hershey sci-fi flick (with "The")

146 106 68 140 176 38

T. 1939 classic (with "The"): 3 wds.

133 86 75 20 174 36 61 155 185 151

U. Site of Albright College

102 1 65 100 28 200 149

V. Incrementally: 3 wds.

58 132 189 161 196 82 124 24 208 64

W. Contemplative

198 12 143 15 107 209 63 126 171 43

X. Simplicity

77 193 94 202 120 3 39 67

Y. Work on an antique, maybe

163 10 26 137 81 60 175 145

YOU HAVE TO HAND IT TO THEM

NEIL SCHOFIELD

It must have been about a quarter past eleven when the doorbell of Gerald's house rang. Gerald stopped pouring the brandies and stood without moving for what seemed to me like a long moment. He shouted into the house where Cassie was clattering about, putting the dishes into the dishwasher, "We'll get it."

Her voice came back, "Thanks, sweetie."

Then he looked at me and said, "Would you mind, Pete? See who that is and tell them to bugger off."

"Right," I said, clambering off the lounge.

We were on the patio outside of the giant picture window that comprises one wall of Gerald's lounge and in front of the pool, which is yet another of Gerald's insane extravagances. Me, Gerald, Paula. And the Claverhouses, Ernest and Maureen, a nervous, wispy couple from across the road. I still didn't understand why they had been invited, and from the look of them, twitchy all through dinner, neither did they.

Gerald finished off the drink he was constructing and handed it to Paula. "Don't mind if I use your husband as a footman, do you?"

Paula looked coolly at me and then carelessly rearranged her Versace. "Not at all," she said, "I'm glad to know someone's found a use for him." In a tone that said, I'm joking, but not really. The Claverhouses giggled weakly in unison.

Gerald grinned. "Meow," he said. I stood up and went to answer the door. I looked back. Gerald was standing there, bottle in hand, staring after me. I walked through the huge lounge and out into the vast hall, with its high ceiling and the curved staircase, and I thought not for the first time what an idiot Gerald was to have bought this pile. He and Cassie rattled round it like peas in a drum. What on earth did he need six bedrooms for? Neither of

them had any family worth speaking of, and they never had people to stay. Whenever I asked him, he just shrugged and shuffled his feet like the idiot he was. An idiot with a crippling mortgage. Which is partly why we were here in the first place. Gerald's mortgage, and Paula's Versace with all its little brothers and sisters, Cassie's Dior and her BMW cabriolet, Paula's Merc and yes, all right, thank you for reminding me, my love of three-legged horses. As I went to the door, I felt as though I were dragging all this after me, this intolerable weight of things, possessions, *stuff*. Jacob Marley lives.

I opened the door. At first I thought there was no one there, the blackness was so complete, and then the man in the black overcoat and ski mask opened his eyes and smiled.

"Good evening," he said. "Sorry to interrupt your dinner."

"What the hell is this?" I said, talking not so much to him as to the huge revolver he was carrying very casually down by his side where I would be sure to see it.

"This," he said, "is what is known in the trade as a robbery."

And now the revolver with its one great eye came up and stared me in the stomach.

"No," said the man, "don't put your hands up. Just laugh and step aside so that I can come in." In case any of Gerald's neighbors should be idly watching.

I tried a laugh, but I couldn't, I really couldn't. In the end, all that came out was a sort of insane cackle, then I stepped out of his way, and now I could see that there were two of them. The second one was slightly smaller and thinner, but he was also wearing the same uniform of black topcoat, roll-neck sweater, and ski mask. They both moved past me. I could, at that moment, have bolted out into the night, calling for help. But I didn't. I thought of Paula and Cassie and Gerald.

I stepped back into the hall and closed the door. The two men stood and watched me. They seemed in some bizarre way to be absorbing most of the light, so that the hall, with its huge chandelier, seemed somber and drained of brightness.

"You," said the first man, the bigger one of the two, "You're Peter Fellowes."

"Yes," I said. "How did you guess?"

"The other one, the flabby one, that's Gerald Hawthorne, right?"

I didn't argue with the "flabby" part, although Gerald probably would have, and would have got himself into trouble for his pains.

"All right, Peter," said the man, "this is what's going to happen. We're going to go into the lounge, and you're going to get everyone else in there."

"We've just finished eating," I said idiotically. "We're having drinks." Why on earth did I tell him that?

"I know that," he said. "We're not stupid, and don't interrupt me again when I'm talking or I'll hurt you."

I shut up.

"Now," he said, "turn round and walk very calmly and normally into the lounge."

My knees felt awkward, as if I had forgotten how to walk properly. I walked into the lounge. Gerald and Paula were still on the patio with the Claverhouses.

"Go and call them in here," said the man. "Don't shout or do anything silly like that. Just speak to them normally."

I went to the french window. Gerald looked up and saw me. Then he looked past me and saw the two men in the lounge. His eyes opened very wide. The Claverhouses looked puzzled but calm.

I said, "Could you come into the lounge, everybody, please?"

Paula, who was facing away from me, heard something unnatural in the overnatural tone I was using. She put down her glass and turned to face me.

"What's going on?" she said.

"We're being robbed," I said. "Or rather, Gerald is, seeing as this is his house. Now, can you *please* come inside?"

Maureen Claverhouse gave a tiny shriek and put her hand over her mouth. Her husband went very white.

"Some sort of joke, surely," he said.

"I wish," I said. "Now can we all come inside, *please*."

Gerald stepped aside to allow Paula to come in first. A strange moment to behave like a proper gent, I thought, but Paula seemed to find it completely natural. My wife, I thought. You can take her anywhere.

"Thank you, Gerald," she said, stepping through the door as gracefully as if she were stepping into a cocktail party. And Gerald followed her, followed by the Claverhouses.

The man with the gun looked at them. "Who are these two?" he said.

"Friends," said Gerald.

"We're neighbors, actually," said Ernest, as though he were quite sensibly trying to put a little distance between Gerald and himself.

"Right," said the man with the gun. "Everybody sit down. And you," he pointed it at Gerald, "go and get your wife from the kitchen." Which meant that he knew where Cassie was. Which told everybody that they'd been watching the house quite thoroughly. Casing it, I suppose they'd say. And more, they knew our names, and they knew

that Gerald was the flabby one, which told everybody they knew a lot about us.

Gerald came back with Cassie trailing behind him. She came into the room and saw the two men and her mouth dropped open—prettily, of course, like everything Cassie did, she did it prettily. And she knew it.

"What—what the hell is all this?" she said. To my ears it sounded a little false—as if she were saying the sort of thing people she thought were supposed to say in that situation. But then, I wasn't doing any better than she was. She went over and stood next to Paula. That was odd, I thought. It was as if she felt safer with my wife than with her husband. And the two of them standing together was the same shock as always. Cassie's white blondness contrasted spectacularly with Paula's black hair and olive skin.

"What this is," said the man with the gun, "is a robbery."

Gerald stepped in front of Cassie.

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," he said. "I never keep large sums of money at home. There's a bit in my wallet, and I'm sure the others could chip in; but as these things go, I'm afraid you've drawn a bit of a blank."

The man simply stood there and let him run on.

Then he said, "You could end up irritating me, you could. When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you. There's nothing here, we know that. It's the shop that interests me."

The shop. I could see the shock suddenly appear on Cassie's face and on Paula's. Shock and a little relief too, I thought. What my face was showing, I had no idea.

Gerald's face dropped. "The shop?" he said a little stupidly.

"That's right," the man said. "The shop." He said it in a good imitation of Gerald's rather idiotic tone. "And this is the way we're going to do it. You two are going to come with me down to the shop. In the meantime, my friend here will stay here with the others. As insurance. When we get back, we'll go and you can ring the law. As soon as you can get free, that is. You'd want to give us a bit of a head start, I know."

He looked round us all. "Now, is that clear enough for you? Nothing too difficult? Any questions?"

Nobody spoke.

He looked at the Claverhouses. "You two can go home. We don't need you."

They stared at him.

"Go home?" Ernest said as though the words had been spoken in Urdu. The man nodded.

"Go home. But don't get any ideas. My partner here will be

staying behind, and he's an edgy type. If he sees so much as a Boy Scout uniform or a baker's van, I won't be able to answer for him. I just don't know what he'd do in a situation like that. What *would* you do, as a matter of interest?" he asked the second man.

The other spoke for the first time since they had entered the house. "Something violent and over the top. I dunno. Kill both the women, I s'pose. I dunno. Depends."

"So," said the man with the gun to the Claverhouses, who were both strangely leaning forward a little as though they were straining to hear him, "don't do anything clever. Don't ring anybody. Don't do anything. The best thing you can do is go straight to bed, and when you wake up in the morning, it'll all be over. No fuss. No problems. No sieges. No blood. Just a quiet, civilized, little jewel-shop robbery. Now, off you go."

The Claverhouses looked round at the rest of us, their heads rotating almost in unison. I wondered vaguely and irrelevantly if they did everything like that. Ernest Claverhouse seemed to want to say something, something reassuring, something brave, but he couldn't find anything.

"Well," he said, "we'll be off, then." Even he seemed to find the words ridiculous.

"Safe home," I said. "Don't worry. I think everything will be all right. Just do what he says."

They both nodded quickly at me, glad to have something to do. They left the lounge, and I could hear them whispering together in the hall as they put on their coats.

"Keep it down out there," called the big man. "Can't hear ourselves think in here." The whispering stopped immediately. Then we heard the door open and close. The big man looked round at the rest of us, and then looked at his watch.

"Right," he said. "You two," he pointed at Cassie and then at Paula, "sit down there." And he pointed at the white leather sofa. Cassie and Paula looked at each other quickly, and rather appraisingly it seemed to me, then they sat, Cassie quickly, Paula with rather an insolent and deliberate slowness. She flicked her black hair back over her shoulder as she did so and looked the big man straight in the eyes. He returned her look.

"Watch this one," he said to the other man. "She's the one. Show her your gun."

The second man took his hand out of his overcoat pocket. He was clutching a large automatic.

"Right," the big man said to the women. "Just so's you know. Shoot something," he said to the other man. The second man aimed negligently at the sideboard and fired the pistol. There was a flat

bang and the porcelain vase that up to then had been holding some flowers disintegrated. A piece of the vase landed next to my foot.

Cassie looked at the man. "You utter pig," she said. "There was no need for that."

"Yes there was," he said. "Just so that you know. Get your coats," he said, with no change of tone or movement, so that it took a moment for Gerald and me to realize he was speaking to us. Gerald lumbered toward me, his face red and his eyes bright with—what? Rage, fear—I couldn't tell.

We went into the hall. Gerald handed me my overcoat. I fully expected him to hold it so that I could put my arms in the sleeves, but he simply half handed, half threw it at me. We put our coats on in silence. There was a murmur of voices from the lounge. Then the big man came out.

"We'll take your car," he said to Gerald, and opened the door.

We climbed into the BMW, me in the back, Gerald at the wheel, and the man next to him. Gerald started the motor and rolled down the drive. Before we had reached the road, the big man clawed the ski mask off his head. He had a hard angular face, and his hair was cut so short he looked almost bald.

"Bloody hell, these things make me itch," he said, and then he looked at Gerald. "What's all this nonsense with the neighbors?" he said. "You never told me there'd be neighbors."

Gerald turned to me and said, "This is Carl."

Like most ideas of Gerald's, it was simple, yet with an enormous potential for disaster. Like his other idea, when I was made redundant by the electronics company where I was marketing director. They decided, one fine day, quite simply to delocalize to Peshawar, where the manufacturing costs were a minute fraction of those in the U.K.

Gerald had come up with the idea that I invest my redundancy payment, which was not unsubstantial, in his family jewelry business, which he had taken over after his father had suffered the fourth and fatal coronary.

Gerald's business was in the center of town in the huge Benfield shopping precinct—a prime position, it seemed to Paula and me, a good solid enterprise with a good solid clientele. I knew nothing about jewelry, we acknowledged to each other, but I knew about marketing. I was a good salesman, which is what Gerald said he needed. A front man, he said, a smooth someone to front the business. He had showed me the books, and based on my admittedly scanty knowledge of bookkeeping, the figures looked healthy

enough. So, I plunged. And once the money was in the bank, Gerald showed me the other books, the real books, the books that showed the debt that my money was, even at that moment, helping to pay off.

"But," said Gerald the day I found out the belated truth, "with you to help, we can really make this business take off."

No, we couldn't. In fact, no one could have. Not with the inroads Gerald was making into the treasury to pay for his house and the trinkets that, she had made plain, Cassie had to have if Gerald was to keep her. And not with the two, count them, two cut-price shops that opened up within half a mile of us. The Rhinestone Cowboys, Gerald called them, or The Zircons, when he was in his Captain Kirk mode. Cut-price everything: an engagement ring for two quid, a tiara for a fiver. I exaggerate, but not much. And a year after I had done the deed, it was clear that we were in the messiest of messes.

I told Paula some of this, but not all, because she had not really recovered from my being made redundant, which she took not only as a personal slight, but also as a sort of social cataclysm. Before we had held the occasional dinner party; now we entertained as though it were going to be outlawed tomorrow. Before she had dressed well but reasonably, going on a big bender every spring and autumn; now she became what I can only describe as a Serial Shopper.

So things went from bad to worse and worse to abysmal. What with the competition cutting our throats, the gigantic rents we were paying, the vast amounts we were each taking out of the business, the increasingly sour meetings we were having with the bank, I suppose we were technically insolvent.

I was sitting in my cubbyhole of an office one morning, reading the appalling cricket news and scanning the runners and riders at Aintree, when Gerald came in and sat down heavily in the other chair. He had been for a meeting with the accountants.

"Well?" I said, knowing what the answer would be.

He shook his head.

"England all out for a hundred and eighty," he said, reading the paper upside down. "Typical."

"No," I said, a bit irritated, "with the accountants."

"Bunch of dismal jimmies," he said. "I've been meaning to sack them for ages."

"They say?"

"They say we should put the keys under the door and call it a day. That we cannot cover our liabilities and that therefore we are technically insolvent. 'And as you know, Mr. Hawthorne,'" he mimicked

savagely, "to continue trading while insolvent is a serious offence." Blah, blah, blah."

"Right, then," I said. "We're belly up."

"Not as long as I'm still standing up," he said. "All we need is a shot in the arm, a breathing space."

"Yes," I said, without much conviction.

"What we need, Pete," he said, "is a robbery."

"How would that help?" I said. "Unless you're thinking about the publicity."

"Nah, bugger the publicity," he said. "What we need is a robbery." And he waggled two fingers of each hand in the air as he said "robbery."

I stared at him. "You're mad," I said.

"Not mad at all, dear old thing. Just being practical, that's all. Just an idea."

"You're actually suggesting that we stage a—a what—a smash and grab?"

"Nothing so dramatic," he said. "A simple, well-conducted robbery is all."

"And how would that help?" I said. "If it came off—if—we'd get the insurance. But that's all."

"Not if the really good stock was in my safe back at the house. You see?"

I saw.

"And afterwards, you do what, you flog the stock?"

He nodded.

"Willi Leppers in Bruges would handle it. I know for a fact he's well bent. But he's quiet."

I considered for a bit, and that was probably my big mistake. I should have turned him down straightaway.

"And who's going to do the dirty deed? You have anyone in mind?"

Gerald smirked.

"That's the easy part. I could find half a dozen blokes who'd be up for a doddle like this. For a flat fee, of course, no shares."

I was sure he could. Gerald's acquaintances included several people I wouldn't give house room to.

So there it was. Gerald's answer to our problems. There was no doubt it was an answer, or would be. If, of course, he could find someone who would do it. If he could sell the story to the insurance company. If they believed it. If he could get rid of the stock. Actually, that was the part I had the least problem with. Gerald's contacts abroad, particularly in Belgium, were excellent. He had a little black book at home with literally hundreds of names in it, merchants, buyers, little two-man firms he'd done business with once.

I blew out my breath.

"You do realize," I said to him, "what we'd be in for if they caught on?"

"They won't," he said. "There'll be just the three of us. You, me, and whoever. Nobody else gets a whisper. But the important thing is that it rings true."

And he told me his plan, or rather the broad outlines of his plan, because there were, at the beginning, some glaring holes big enough to drive a police car through.

"It's foolproof," he said. "And it's a classic M.O. Works every time."

M.O. He was talking like a character from John Creasey now. He was really enjoying himself, was Gerald, doing the criminal mastermind, the Planner.

But I had to admit that the wives-as-hostages part of the idea was quite good. It seemed to be a well-established technique. I had read only weeks before about a gang who had done the same thing to a Barclays Bank manager. And using the CCTV cameras to back up our story was also neat. Gerald had had them installed nine months before, and I had squawked a bit at the cost, but in fact they were going to help the plan along, if the plan went ahead. I wondered a bit belatedly if Gerald had already had this in mind when he installed the system, if he'd been planning this for the last nine months. I wouldn't have put it past him.

"If you can find somebody we can depend on," I said, "I'll think about it."

"Trust me," he said. "I've got a bloke in mind."

Of course he had. He'd had somebody in mind even before he opened his mouth to me. Trust Gerald. Well, yes, as far as it goes.

I suppose that I allowed myself to be dragged along by Gerald. At any rate, I agreed to discuss the thing with him, the "job" as he called it, in the following week. Then one day, he came back after lunch with a self-satisfied look on his face.

"I've found him," he said.

"Who?"

"The bloke who's going to do the job."

And now suddenly it was real. I felt that things were going too fast for me.

Gerald said, "You and Paula come round for dinner on Thursday."

"This Thursday?" I said. This was much too fast for me.

"'Course this Thursday. No point in hanging about. My bloke's up for it and he wants to get on with it as well. And," he said, "guess what? Old Mother Bellingham's brought her diamonds in for cleaning and a bit of resetting work. It couldn't have happened at a better time. Even broken up that stuff's worth a good hundred grand."

Old Mother Bellingham, as Gerald called her, was the widow of a former Lord Mayor, who had also inherited her defunct husband's textile business. She was an old client of Gerald's father, and reading between the lines, I suspected that she might have been more than a client. She was now in an advanced state of decomposition, but she still owned a fortune in jewels, and she came in regularly, loyally, to have them cleaned.

I could see with the Bellingham diamonds in the strong room, it was a good time to act. "But," I said, "shouldn't I—I mean, don't you want me to meet him, this bloke of yours?"

"No point," Gerald said briefly. "You'll be seeing him soon enough. It's all set up. He's going to have a walk around the shopping center, have a gander at the shop."

"Listen," I said, "are we really sure we want to go ahead with this?"

"I am, squire," he said, "and you'd better be sure too, because on Thursday the balloon goes up. Dinner at eight thirty, you and Paula, right?"

But what I hadn't expected was the Claverhouses. And neither had the big man.

"I thought we needed a bit of independent corroboration," Gerald said.

"I hope there aren't going to be any more nasty little surprises like that," the man called Carl said. "I'm not keen on them."

Gerald looked sideways at him and nodded at the ski mask in Carl's hand.

"You are going to put that back on, aren't you?"

"When it's time," Carl said.

I suddenly had the feeling that Gerald wasn't quite as in charge of the situation as he'd like to be. And that the man knew more about what he was doing than Gerald. Gerald had the same feeling apparently because he changed gear viciously to start the descent into town. He said, "I hope your mate is as competent as you are."

"He's as competent as he needs to be. Don't you worry about him. You just worry about us and what we're doing."

"I just want to be certain he won't do anything—well, anything stupid."

"Anything stupid? What's that supposed to mean?"

Gerald lifted one hand from the wheel and made a peculiar little gesture.

"He's alone with two defenseless women."

Carl looked at him for a long moment. Then he said, "You're conning the insurance for a small fortune, committing God knows how

many different crimes, and you're worried about Georgie. You want your head examined, you do. You'd do better to worry about me and what you'd do if I decided to take everything and not just the small stuff."

I could see Gerald's smirk in the rearview mirror, and I knew what was amusing him. There was nothing but the small stuff at the shop. Gerald had taken all the good expensive items home in his case that afternoon.

That was the part that had given us the most trouble. For Gerald's plan to work, we were depending on the cameras in the shop. But for Gerald's plan to work, he needed to get the valuable stock out of the strong room before the robbery.

"Why?" I had said to him. "Why doesn't your man take the lot and then we divide it up in the car, or in a bus shelter or whatever?"

Gerald had a problem with explaining. And out of all his half-baked stammering came the clear idea that he was afraid—certain—that his man, this man he trusted, faced with a heap of very expensive and fenceable jewelry, would suddenly change his mind about the fake robbery and turn it into a real one.

So given that the cameras turned all the time, how was Gerald going to get the jewelry out of the strong room once it had been put away for the night? He couldn't be thinking about a fortuitous power cut. That would look slightly odd, to say the least.

"How are you going to manage it?" I had asked him. "You'll be on camera, don't forget. That's going to be a bit suspicious to say the least when you show your holiday video to the police, if you and Sheila put the stock away, and then five minutes after the staff have left you go back into the strong room and come out with your hands full."

He didn't like that. He didn't like to think that there was something he hadn't planned for. But he came up with the answer, I'll give him that. He came into the office with his coat on and said, "How's this?"

"How's what?" I said.

"Notice anything?"

No I hadn't, I said. He took his coat off, unbuttoned everything, down to and including his shorts, and there was this sack thing hanging down over his stomach. He'd bought a sort of backpack made of light material. Not the sort of thing you go up Everest with, more your tourist's bag for carrying light personal things. And he was wearing it backwards, or rather frontwards.

"That should do it. I'll put my coat on, I often do that; Sheila and I will put the stock away, then I'll stay in there for five minutes tops and Bob's your uncle. I come out with nothing in my hands, lock the

strong room, and off I go. Ingenious, or what?"

Well, it seemed as ingenious as anything else in this whole rickety business. And the feeling got stronger and stronger that Gerald was making it up as he went along, adding a little tweak here, ironing out a little wrinkle there.

So why didn't I get out? Because in spite of everything, I was convinced it was going to work, and the thought of my investment going down the toilet as the only alternative didn't please me. And truth to tell, secretly, I really didn't believe we were going to go through with it. I thought it was another Gerald scheme, wild and surreal, but ultimately unrealizable.

But here we were, in the car, heading for town and the shop, with Gerald trying his best to explain the Claverhouses to a man who didn't appear in the best of moods.

Gerald said, "I thought it would be more convincing to have some independent witnesses. I mean, how much weight would they give if it was just our wives. They could easily be in on it. At least, that's how I'd think if I was a loss adjuster."

Carl grunted, unconvinced, looking out of the window at the passing town. He seemed to have lost interest.

"Just don't give me any more surprises," he said, "they make me nervous. And when I'm nervous, I get naughty."

"No more surprises," said Gerald, clearly getting a little of his confidence back. "It's just as we said from now on."

Carl grunted again.

Gerald parked the car near the pedestrian precinct, not too near and not too far. We all got out. It was raining slightly, a chilly rain with a little wind behind it. It was miserable, but the good thing was that it seemed to be keeping people off the streets. There were no strollers, no window shoppers.

Gerald locked up and we set off into the pedestrian precinct, with our heads down against the rain, Gerald and I in front, Carl a pace behind us. I looked back and saw that he had pulled on his ski mask again and that he was carrying a bag, a large leather affair. He kept the other hand in his pocket. He obviously didn't mind what people thought, if there were people around to think anything. And anyway, a man in a ski mask on a night like this might seem odd, eccentric, but not immediately suspicious. But we met no one.

When we arrived at the shop, Gerald already had the keys out and ready. He unlocked the door and we went in. The alarm went off, as usual. Gerald went to the little cupboard on the right and silenced it. Then he switched on the main lighting panel, which also switched on the cameras and the recorders. He hesitated then, looked around as if he were uncertain. Carl gave him a sharp prod with the hand in

his pocket. A little bit of business for the camera. I had a hard job not to look at it, squatting there high up near the ceiling with its blank, incurious eye.

We threaded our way through the empty display cases to the back of the shop and the corridor, which led to the workrooms and the offices. We went through, Carl immediately behind us. We stopped in front of the strong room, under the eye of the second camera, and Gerald selected the keys. He swung open the heavy steel door, and stepped back to let Carl go in.

Then we just stood about, trying to look helpless, which wasn't hard. Then Gerald stepped into the strong room:

"Everything there's yours for the taking," I heard him say.

Then I heard Carl say, "Not a lot here. This is rubbish, this is."

Gerald said, "The envelope there on the shelf. That's for you."

I could hear even outside in the corridor that Carl was riffling the notes in the envelope.

Then Gerald said, "All right?" and got a grunt for an answer. He seemed to like grunting, did Carl.

Finally, after letting enough time pass for him to have taken everything from the trays, Carl came out, carrying his bag in front of him, well in view. Gerald locked up, and we filed down the corridor, back through the shop where Gerald set the alarm again. I wondered why he bothered, seeing that we had just been cleaned out, but I didn't say anything. I hadn't said anything since we left the house, it occurred to me.

We walked through the precinct to the car. Carl took off his ski mask.

"Right," he said. "Sweet as a nut."

Gerald nodded, and we got into the car. We didn't speak on the way back to the house. There didn't seem to be anything to say. I was picturing the interviews with the police and the insurance people and trying to decide what face I ought to pull when talking about a robbery that had cleaned us out of hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of jewels.

Gerald turned into the drive. The lights were still on in the lounge. I don't know why I was surprised. I had unconsciously expected everyone to have gone to bed. But of course not. Georgie was keeping everyone up.

But when we went in, we found that Georgie was in fact sitting with his head in his hands, bleeding copiously onto Gerald's white leather sofa. Carl cursed. Georgie looked at us.

Gerald said, "What the hell happened?"

Georgie said, "I let one of them get behind me. The blond number said she had to go for a pee. The other one was taking off her blouse."

Paula taking off her blouse? I don't know what my expression looked like, but if it looked anything like Gerald's, it must have been ludicrous.

Carl said, "Right. How long ago was this?"

Georgie said, "I dunno. The blond one hit me with something, I been out for a bit. I dunno how long."

Carl said, "Right. Up." He jerked Georgie to his feet. Georgie moaned. "Out. Now." He didn't even bother to look at Gerald or me, but snatched up Georgie's ski mask from the sofa and marched him to the door.

Then he turned and said, "I don't need any grief, but if I get any, I cough. All right?"

Gerald said, "Right," as though he was having trouble making his lips work. "Right," he said again. And then Carl and Georgie were gone. We heard the door slam.

"Well," I said, "there's a turn up. Nice one from the wives there."

"Oh shut up," he said. "I've got to think. All right, so they've gone for help."

"Why didn't they just phone?" I said

"How the hell should I know?" he said irritably. "Wanted to get a breath of air. How do I know?"

He was pacing the lounge.

"The thing is," he said, "nothing's changed. We got a look at Georgie, and so did the girls probably. But that's nothing."

I went and poured myself a stiff brandy from the drinks table. Gerald came over and did the same.

"All we have to do is wait for them to arrive with the cops," he said, "and tell our story."

"Right," I said. "Right." I sat down.

After two hours, at about one in the morning when it was clear that no one was coming, I looked at Gerald. He was sitting holding his glass hanging between his knees, staring at the carpet.

"Gerald," I said.

"What?" he said.

"Open it up," I said.

He remained still for a moment and then sighed deeply and got heavily to his feet. I followed him upstairs to the bedroom. He went to the large mirror that hung on the wall and swung it aside. He worked the dial. I could see from where I was that his fingers were trembling.

"What's the combination?" I said. "Your birthday? Hers?"

"Hers," he said shortly. I closed my eyes. Not for long, just long enough for him to swing open the safe and show us what was inside, which was a lot of nothing.

Afterwards, back in the lounge we were trying to work out how much of the plan was left without the wives and decided that there wasn't much, even with the bloody Claverhouses.

Gerald said with a sort of gloomy flippancy, "Well, you have to hand it to them, don't you?"

"Well," I said, "yes, yes you do. Because if you don't, they'll find a way to get it anyway."

He nodded.

"Gerald," I said, "you told her, didn't you?"

"Not as such," he said.

"You told her."

"I just—" he waved his hands about, "I just said she shouldn't be worried if something happened."

"You told her. And you and Cassie were going to disappear with the lot and leave poor old Pete to oversee the liquidation of a bankrupt jewelry business."

He shook his head miserably. There was nothing he could say.

Of course he had told her. Because *she'd* told *me*. About how they had planned their own little wrinkle, Cassie disappearing, Gerald shrugging his shoulders, *Sorry Pete, but there's nothing I can do, what can I tell you, Cassie's gone off with the lot*. Then, after a decent interval, him going to find Cassie at the prearranged rendezvous. The two of them free to start up somewhere else, Spain maybe, for choice. It was a good plan as far as it went, and Cassie and I hadn't had to modify it much, simply replacing Gerald with me.

But Cassie and Paula had obviously decided that they had an even better idea and now, given the time we'd wasted, easily enough for them to drive to the airport, they were loose somewhere in Europe with the jewelry and Gerald's little black book of addresses. I sighed. I couldn't blame Cassie for preferring Paula to Gerald. But what did rankle a bit was that she clearly preferred Paula to *me*.

I wondered idly whether if I phoned the Rembrandt Hotel in Amsterdam I would still find Cassie booked in under the name of Botham, a name we had decided was easy to remember, being the name of her maternal grandfather and also of one of my all-time favorite cricket players.

I decided that, on balance, all things considered, I probably wouldn't. Paula and Cassie have never liked cricket. ♣

HITCH-HUNTING

JEREMIAH HEALY

Coby Pierce, soaked to the bone in his denim jacket and black jeans, watched as the old Lincoln slewed onto the shoulder of the state highway, no more than fifty rainy feet beyond his outstretched thumb. Shuddering in amazement and shouldering the duffel bag, he ran toward the car's passenger side, noticing its license plate had a logo stamped into it. The stick figure of a cripple.

Easy pickings, unless there were others along for the ride.

Once at the rear window, Coby could see—even through the worms of water sliding down the glass—that it was just a geezer behind the steering wheel. Coby yanked open the heavy door and pitched his duffel onto the back seat, where it landed next to a pair of those shiny metal braces he'd seen on the TV news once about polio freaks from, like, the 1950s.

Even better: Dude can't walk straight, much less run away.

Coby slammed the rear door, pulled open the front one, and slid onto the passenger seat. It was covered by thick, clear plastic, with the same under the geezer.

Old guy probably pees his pants; he can't get to a toilet in time.

Coby closed the front door too. Another solid thunk, the way a car door should sound, not the tinny sound of the last Jap coupe he'd boosted. Though he couldn't complain about the driver of that one.

No, he couldn't complain about her—or the things Coby made her do for him—at all.

"Welcome," the geezer said, lips barely moving as he extended his hand. "My name's Oswald."

"Jim," Coby lied, just in case anything went wrong later. "Jim Davis."

They shook to seal the introductions, the dude's limp grip more like a dead fish.

Letting go, Coby said, "Hey, you got the same name as the guy killed one of the Kennedys?"

"Yes, though Oswald is my first name, not my last."

When the geezer didn't go on, Coby just said, "Well, Oz, thanks for the ride."

"My pleasure, Jim, but please fasten your seat belt before I re-enter traffic."

Re-enter traffic. Both old *and* odd, this guy.

The click of the buckle connected to the shoulder harness was solid, just like the door. Coby flat-out *loved* big American cars.

Speaking of which, Oswald then put the car in gear with his right hand, but instead of just driving away, he used his right again to work a lever on the dash, the car's engine revving as he checked both mirrors, then slowly edged back onto the road.

There were lots of other buttons and switches around the thing Coby was interested in, so he pointed. "What's that lever?"

Oswald glanced over to him. "I had polio when I was a boy, Jim."

The word *bingo!* popped into Coby's brain.

"I need these braces behind me for walking, and my feet aren't reliable on even the pedals. This lever lets me throttle the gas, and this one—" The geezer's left index finger tapped another lever on the other side of the steering wheel. "—is for the brake."

Jesus, Coby thought. Taking this car might be easy, but learning to drive it could be a real pain in the ass. Or a good challenge. Maybe even use the braces back there to look pitiful, to make boosting the *next* ride that much easier.

"So, Oz, where are you heading?"

"Down the highway. Gayle—my daughter—attended college in that big town about ten miles behind us, and I drive this stretch of road whenever I can." Oswald looked at Coby squarely, the dude's eyes dull and kind of . . . cold? "The students often hitch-hike, Jim, and I like to help them out."

This could be kind of fun. "You figure me for a student, Oz?"

"I wasn't sure. But you certainly seemed like you could use a lift."

"Hitch-hunting," said Coby, sharing the word that was one of his favorites, mainly because he'd made it up shortly after changing . . . careers.

"I'm sorry?" said Oswald, but never taking his eyes off the road—careful old geezer—the wipers of the big car plowing the rain off the windshield.

"I never liked the word 'hitchhiking.' I mean, you're alongside the road, looking for a ride, right? So you're not *hiking* at all, Oz. You're walking backwards, thumb sticking out. What you're *really* doing is, like, hitch-hunting, account of you're waiting for that one—" Coby was gonna say "stupid," until he realized they were passing through a crossroads with some stores and houses

clumped on either side of the highway, and he didn't want to make this dude jumpy in a populated area. "—that one kind driver who gets off on helping other people out."

"Hitch-hunting, *hitch-hunting*," Oswald rolling the word around his mouth a few times, the way Coby milked a shot of good booze when he could afford it. Or steal it. Then the geezer turned his head to Coby and smiled, yellow teeth, crooked and big. "I like that, Jim. I like that very much."

"It just fits better, you know?"

"Yes. Yes, it certainly does."

Coby decided there was definitely something a tad off about this dude. Oswald looked normal enough: suit, tie, haircut, mid-level lifer for some corporation the government forced to hire weird 'cripples. But the geezer had a way of talking that came across as more . . . *detached*—yeah. Yeah, that was the word. Like his mind was on something else. Coby knew a guy like that from back home, and he was on some kind of meds for depression.

Might could have some fun with this one. Nothing like the girl in the coupe, of course. But fun just the same.

"So, Oz, tell me: What do you do for a living?"

"I'm retired now, but I used to be an industrial designer."

Didn't make sense. "You designed industries?"

A small laugh, what Coby always figured *chuckled* meant.

"No, Jim. I designed machines. Drill presses, mostly."

"Drill presses?" Coby conjured up a good lie in his head almost without trying. "My uncle lost his hand working one of those."

"Oh," said Oswald. "I'm sorry to hear that."

The geezer didn't sound sorry. "I sure hope you didn't design the machine made my uncle a cripp."

Coby thought that might get a rise out of Oswald, what with him being a cripp himself after all. But instead, the geezer just turned his head and nodded once, slowly, like that was all the energy he had left inside him. "I certainly do hope that press wasn't mine, Jim. Do you recall the manufacturer of it?"

Recall the . . . ? "No way. Happened when I was just a kid."

"As with my polio, Jim."

"What?"

The geezer's eyes went back to the road. "Your uncle suffered his disability from injury when you were a boy, and I suffered my affliction from polio when I was only a boy myself. My parents thought it was a simple summer flu at first, but then came the real diagnosis. And the paralysis, the isolation wards, the physical therapy that could make you cry out in pain and frustration."

Christ, if there was a connection there between his fake uncle and this whack-job crip, Coby sure didn't see it.

Then the dude said, "What kind of work do you do, Jim?"

Back on track. And near a real deserted area, just trees and maybe a pullout where the Lincoln couldn't be seen from the road, get the thing done.

"I already told you, Oz. I hitch-hunt."

"But toward what . . . destination?"

"No 'destination.'"

"Then toward what purpose?"

"I like riding in cars." Coby shrugged, part of the show, but the movement also let the knife slide tip-first down the inside of his right sleeve, the handle fitting that palm perfectly and out of the geezer's line of sight as well. "Only, Oz, I have to tell you: I like driving them even better."

A deep sigh from behind the wheel. "You're a carjacker."

Another good-hearted senior citizen disappointed by Coby's generation. "You could say that, yeah."

"Let me show you something, Jim."

The knife could wait, unless the geezer made for a weapon himself. "Sure."

The dude used just the index finger of his right hand to flip down the visor above his head. From the little mirror flap he pulled out a photo and laid it face up on the console between them.

"Cute chick," said Coby, leering at the more-pretty-than-foxy teenager. Nice tits under a T-shirt but sweatpants hiding her legs.

"My daughter, Jim, in a photo taken four years ago. Witnesses interviewed by the state police reported seeing Gayle stop to pick up a hitch . . . hunter. They described a young man much like you, and the detectives involved speculated that he took her car, which was found about fifty miles from here in a heavily wooded area." Oswald glanced around at the passing scenery. "Rather like this one, Jim. But we never found Gayle's body."

Hiding a body was something Coby could teach a college course on, except there was no need to make things any harder on the geezer.

Or was there?

"Hey, Oz," embroidering the lie before he even started telling it, "I think I remember her. Yeah, a bitchin' bod but kind of sweet."

Coby turned to look at the geezer, read his reaction to the next part. "Your Gayle cried a lot, though, claiming she was still a virgin and all. Well, Oz, believe me, by the time I got finished with her, she couldn't claim that anymore."

The dude's eyes closed, but just for a second. Then he took the photo off the console, air kissed it, and put it back into the visor. "Would it surprise you, Jim, that you're the third young man to tell me some version of that story?"

It did surprise Coby, actually. He thought of himself as almost unique, you know.

Now Oswald shook his head. "But, Jim, do you know that neither of them could seem to remember where he put her body? Which doesn't seem fair, really. I mean, to take a life, and then not give the victim's survivors closure? At least an opportunity to bury the remains of a loved one?"

Hey, can you believe this geezer, wanting to . . . what, *debate* the issue? "Yeah, well, you got to look at things from our side of the situation. Those C.S.I. shows on television, they tell us that hiding the body and dumping the car are real good ideas. Plus—" Coby glanced around like Oswald had a minute before. "—the rain's even better, washes away all kinds of evidence."

"Yes. Yes, it does that."

Now the dude was nodding slowly, even . . . sympathetically. Too weird.

Time for Mr. Blade to meet up with Mr. Throat. "Okay, Oz, here's what you're gonna do. Pull over at the first dirt track that goes into the woods."

"You have a weapon, I suppose?"

Coby grinned, brought the knife up and wiggled it a little in his lap. But he also kept the whole item below the dashboard, even though Coby didn't think anybody in a passing car would be able to see through the window, the way it was still pouring outside.

Oswald said, "I recall a fire road up ahead."

Another half mile, and sure enough, there was the red numbering on a white sign. The geezer—ever the careful driver—checked all his mirrors before pulling in and going slow down the road, hard-packed despite the rain.

Coby kept his eyes on Oswald's hands. "Keep going till I tell you to stop."

"I will, Jim."

Christ, the dude showing no fear. Just that dull voice to match those dull eyes. Then Coby thought maybe this was natural for crips, to realize they couldn't control much in their lives, and so you could lead them around like sheep.

A good spot turned up on the right. The road widened, and there was a little path winding into the trees. Even if it was a recreation trail, nobody was going to be on it in this weather.

"Over here should do just fine, Oz."

Checking those mirrors for the last time, the geezer did what he was told, using the brake lever to bring the Lincoln to a complete stop, then shifting into park.

"If I turn off the engine, Jim, you may have trouble starting it back up again."

Hey, if this wasn't the *oddest* dude Coby had ever met. "Well now, thanks for that, Oz. I really appreciate your concern and all."

One hand on the wheel and the other on the console, Oswald jerked kind of sidesaddle to him. "You see, I modified this car myself."

Coby tilted his head toward the buttons, switches, and levers on the driver's side. "Those things?"

"Among others. For example, your seat belt, once fastened as I asked you to do, can be released only from my side of the steering wheel."

Now that geezer was trying to creep him out. However, when Coby ran his left thumb over the buckle, he really didn't feel any button.

Enough of this crap. Coby lunged with the knife in his right hand pointed at Oswald's throat and—

Coby couldn't move his right shoulder.

"I'm afraid, Jim, that the strap mechanism is also a specialty item. One abrupt movement by you, and it draws you back against the seat. Even if you now relax, the strap will hold you fast."

Coby was trapped all right, no give whatsoever to the belt stretched diagonally across his chest. He felt liquid running down his neck, but not from his time in the rain.

No, it was a panic sweat, and Coby could smell the fear starting to rise off him.

He made a little sound deep in his throat and started to saw at the strap with his knife.

"Jim, that blade seems—and I'm sure, has been—deadly, but the material embracing you is tougher than Cordura. I doubt even your knife's point could penetrate it, and you certainly can't cut through it."

The dude was right: The blade could have been made of plastic like the seat cover under him, for all the good it was doing.

Coby licked his lips, tried to think. "Uh, like, what's going on here, Oz?"

"It's quite simple, really." The geezer's eyes went up toward his driver's side visor. "I want you to tell me where you hid my daughter's body."

"I didn't, man."

"You've already confessed, Jim."

"No! No, I swear. Never met her, never even *seen*—"

"Then why did you offer that you had?"

"To . . . to get a rise out of you, you know?"

"That would be rather cruel, Jim, don't you think?"

"Hey, sure, sure. Oz, I'm sorry, okay? But I didn't kill your daughter."

The dull eyes closed, then opened again. "After my Gayle disappeared, I went into a deep depression. I couldn't work, or sleep, or even think about anything but finding my little girl, laying her to rest next to my wife, her mother. Then I began taking antidepressants in rather large doses."

Coby thought another *bingo!* would go off in his mind, but somehow it just didn't come.

"Which, Jim, is the reason that I may seem a bit like an android to you. Or at least to normal people. But I'm really quite focused. You might even say 'obsessed.' With finding my Gayle through the only person in the world who can tell me where she is. Her killer." The geezer juttied his chin closer. "In other words, you, Jim."

"Oz, I'm telling you!" No. No, you're losing it. Calm down. "I don't know anything about your daughter."

The eyes closed again for that pause, like a nervous tic for some guys. When the eyes opened once more, the dude said, "You do appreciate my dilemma? Earlier, when there was no evident threat to you, I heard a confession that you raped and killed my daughter."

"I didn't do it!"

"You knew Gayle was a virgin, Jim."

Coby couldn't believe that for once in his new career he had to rely on the truth. "I made it up, Oz. I swear, I made it all up!"

"And you were right about Gayle being sweet too. The kind of person who would offer someone less fortunate than she a ride in her car."

Coby felt tears welling in his eyes, blurring his vision like the heavy rain outside had before he got into the Lincoln. "I didn't hurt your daughter, man. I never even *met* her."

"So you say now, when your options appear rather limited. But, either way, you've lied to me at least once, and one version of your account is supported a great deal more persuasively than the other, thanks to that knife in your hand."

Hand. Knife.

Though Coby was a righty, he could switch the knife to his left hand, slash the bastard crip's throat, and then figure out how to make the seat belt work. Or maybe somehow just wriggle out of it.

But first things first.

Coby flashed the knife into his left palm so fast even he couldn't see it happening, but when he struck out at Oswald, the geezer's right hand snagged Coby's at the wrist.

Not the way the dude shook hands, though. This was like being caught in a vice.

"After the polio made my legs into rubber bands, my parents used to wheel me out into the sunshine. When God takes away one of your abilities, Jim, he often helps you compensate via another."

"Oz, please don't—"

"Within two months, my hand-to-eye coordination had developed to the point where I could snatch a fly out of the air, cup it in my enclosed palm without even damaging a wing. And years of weight lifting built up my arms and shoulders to the point where I could probably crush your wrist right now. And I'm afraid I'll have to do just that, unless you drop the knife."

Coby felt the bones above his left hand caving in toward the center.

"Let it go, Jim."

Squeezing his eyes shut from the pain, Coby started to cry out loud, but he let the handle slip from his fingers, and he heard the knife clatter onto the console of the Lincoln.

Oswald let go of his wrist. "Jim?"

When Coby finally looked over at the dude, the knife was gone.

"Jim, where did you hide my Gayle's body?"

Coby started to speak, then realized it was a sob, not a word, and he tried to catch his breath. "Please, man, I swear to God. I'll swear on anything you want. But," slow now, slow and even, "I . . . never . . . touched . . . your . . . daughter."

The geezer closed his eyes again, but instead of opening them right away like before, he hung his head, then shook it slowly, side to side. "You are not helping my depression here, Jim."

Coby was afraid he was going to soil himself. "You've gotta believe—"

"Oh," the face snapping up now. "Oh, I do believe you, Jim. You aren't the one responsible for my Gayle's death."

It was Coby's turn to hang his head, the waterfall of tears still flowing, but now in relief rather than panic. No, wait a second: He never *panicked*. Coby was just a little afraid, that's all. Like anybody would've been, this crazy cripple playing devil games on them.

"Okay, Oz," Coby said, getting a hold of himself, eyes kind of drifting around the dashboard, from all the gizmos on the driver's side to the glove compartment in front of him. "You believe my story, you can let me go now."

"Why would I do that, Jim?"

Coby sent the geezer a sideways look. "Because I didn't hurt your daughter."

"But what about your attempted carjacking just now?"

Coby sensed the comeback more in his chest than his brain. "Just your word against mine, man. And I don't see the police buying your story, especially with all these . . . torture chamber 'modifications' you made to your car. You'd come across as seriously weird, Oz."

"Yes." The slow, single nod. "Yes, you're right, of course. I thought about doing that with the first one, but as you say, I realized how it would look in context."

Coby got caught up in the middle there. "The first one what?"

"Of you."

"Of *me*?"

"No, the second-person plural, Jim. I meant the first carjacker who I thought might be my Gayle's killer."

Coby didn't like the sound of that, and another trickle of sweat started down his neck. "Oz, let me go here."

"To loose you on an unsuspecting public? To let you do what someone cut from your same cloth did to my daughter? No, I think not."

Have to try something different. A little humor, maybe? "Hey, it's gonna get kind of tiresome, me riding around with you, don't you think?"

"Oh, I agree, Jim." Oswald flicked a switch on his side of the steering wheel and the glove compartment door dropped open, bouncing a few times on its hinges.

Coby flinched, tried to cover his reaction. "Nice trick, Oz."

"Saves me straining to unlatch it from behind the wheel, Jim. But that's not the modification I want you to appreciate the most."

The geezer opened the console and took out a pair of screwy yellow glasses with big lenses and side things that wrapped around his ears, making him look like a praying mantis.

"Oz, what're those for?"

"They're industrial safety goggles, Jim. To prevent any foreign matter from striking, and perhaps injuring, the eyes."

Coby wasn't following him at all. "The hell are you talking about, man?"

"You do recall asking me earlier about what I did for a living?"

"Yeah. So?"

"And you did notice the plastic slipcovers on the seats?"

Coby felt his mouth open, but no words came out until the dude's finger moved to flick another switch.

"Oz, you're not making any—"

Suddenly, from the mouth of the glove compartment came first a grinding, machine-like noise, then the business end of a rotating, multibladed metal thing like a giant sprocket wrench.

Advancing straight toward Coby's belly. And big enough to involve his crotch as well.

The "hitch-hunter" began screaming, thrashing his arms and legs, rocking the car as he tried to break free from the seat belt harness.

Oswald said, "A horizontal drill press, Jim. My most impressive modification yet. And conceived, as I believe all significant creations are, purely out of love."

Coby Pierce registered that the Lincoln stopped rocking shortly after the drill press broke his skin, but he kept screaming anyway. ♀

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

NPR DYE KMLYDJ YDDCRE DSRJ MN NPR MTNLDB,
NPRB URBN AMTC ND PLK ARRJ MK LO KDZRADEW
ZMKPLBF NPR AMJCRRG'K OMTR LB NPR GRMBQN
ADUY UMK M EMLYW DTTQJRBTR.

—E. P. JREEMYY

CIPHER: _____

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 236

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

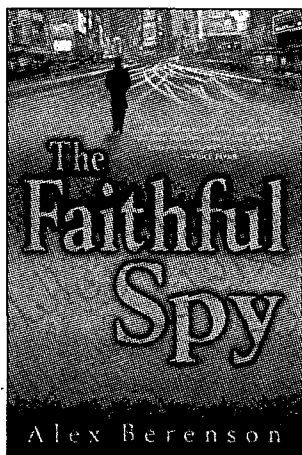
In time for your summer reading, here are three thriller writers who want to keep you on the edge of your beach chair. Lee Child, Randy Wayne White, and newcomer Alex Berenson all write harrowing thrillers in which heroes with brains as well as brawn are immersed in explosive plots based on contemporary events.

Alex Berenson's debut novel, *THE FAITHFUL SPY* (Random House, \$24.95), introduces John Wells, a CIA operative who is one of only a handful who can speak and read Arabic and understand Islamic culture. He is also the only American agent to have penetrated al Qaeda. The few who know of his existence consider him "a singular national asset."

The problem at the start of the book is that Wells, who has converted to Islam and joined al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan, is so deeply undercover that even his handlers are unsure of his loyalty. And Wells is not in any position to allay those fears by attempting to communicate with them by ordinary means.

As an American, Wells has to go to great lengths to gain the trust of his al Qaeda companions, and he can never be sure how much they trust him. Berenson weaves a compelling and suspenseful tale as terrorist mastermind Omar Khadri plays cat and mouse with Wells while he plots the next vicious attack on U.S. soil and plans to use Wells as one of his weapons, willingly or unwillingly.

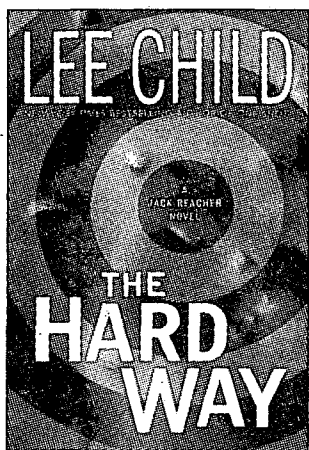
Berenson, a *New York Times* reporter who has spent time in Iraq, is a skilled writer, able to take the reader into the mountains of Afghanistan, the urban jungle of Baghdad, or into the mind of a terrorist. Berenson's tale is strengthened by his ability to make the terrorists human and credible rather than mere monsters. Likewise, his dissection of the American intelligence community, its tremendous resources and abilities and its offsetting pettiness and squabbles, is convincing.



But that's just icing on the cake for a story that pits an enemy that is cunning, resourceful, and completely ruthless against the one man who can prevent an even worse attack on American soil than that of 9/11. This is as enthralling a thriller as you are likely to read and one all the more frightening for its utter plausibility.

Jack Reacher makes his reappearance in **THE HARD WAY** (Delacorte, \$25) by Lee Child, where he tries to earn a one million dollar fee in a very hard way indeed. Reacher is an ex-military cop who combines deadly martial skills with a quick mind and an ability to make decisions on the move. All of those abilities come into play in his tenth adventure, which follows last year's *New York Times* bestseller, *One Shot*.

A simple cup of coffee at an outside café is enough to start Reacher on a harrowing trip that involves mercenaries, a kidnapped wife and daughter, a murder victim's determined sister, and Reacher playing the role of white knight despite his surface cynicism. As he drinks his coffee, Reacher observes a kidnapping payoff, although he is unaware of it at the time.



Eventually, this leads to a meeting with Edward Lane, head of a small group of highly trained mercenaries. Lane's wife, Kate, has been smoothly kidnapped despite the presence of her bodyguard, and although Lane has paid the requested ransom, his wife remains missing. Though surrounded by men who trained and served as Navy SEALs, Delta Force, Recon Marines, and Green Berets, Lane turns to Reacher because of his experience as an Army CID investigator. Lane offers Reacher a cool million to find Kate, which, in spite of his initial distrust of Lane, he accepts.

Child's tale takes on new spins without ever losing momentum and builds toward a climactic confrontation that is both violent and unexpected in the way it unfolds. His cast of characters include some of the most odious and horrific villains, a couple of courageous women, and a man who will go to any length to get back his wife and punish the man who took her. This is escapist literature at its best with action that rivets and images that stay burned in the mind's eye long afterward.

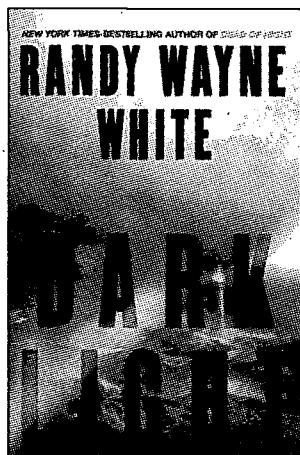
Like Berenson, Randy Wayne smoothly incorporates recent horrific events into his novels; in **DARK LIGHT** (Putnam, \$24.95) it is the the 2005 hurricanes and their aftermath. In his thirteenth

adventure, Doc Ford, a marine biologist and a former covert operative, deals with long buried secrets revealed by the hurricanes that ravaged the Sanibel and Captiva islands in Florida and the unscrupulous plunderers who followed the storms.

Doc lives on Captiva Island and despite the normally tranquil coastal environment, he is never far away from danger, often of an ecological sort, as well as threats to Doc and those he counts among his friends. Likewise, mystic elements are common in White's tales, but in *Dark Light* they are combined with a killer rapist, a mysterious woman, and an old shipwreck newly revealed by the hurricane in a way that creates three interwoven but almost separate stories.

In the novel, the hurricanes that battered Florida and the Gulf Coast radically changed the environment and unleashed human rats like Bern Heller, who preyed on the storms' victims. After the hurricanes, one of Doc's friends finds a Nazi medal, and a race ensues to locate and claim the wreck from which it came. And Doc meets a most unusual woman whose age and charms seem to change unnaturally and whose allure Doc finds very troubling. As Doc's mystic friend Tomlinson puts it, "a hurricane is like a beam of light. It exposes decay, and reveals unexpected strengths."

White, a longtime resident of Captiva, reaches back into the early history of Florida's development and to the extraordinary men and women who made the Sanibel area their home for a while, such as Thomas Edison, John L. Lewis, Henry Ford, Charles and Anne Lindbergh, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Florida's rich history includes the hosting of German prisoners of war during WWII; there were even rumors of German submarine activity off the Florida coast. As always, White's love and knowledge of the islands and their history provides a fascinating background, and the romantic and mystic strains he weaves into the story contrast vividly with the coarse destructiveness of the unscrupulous villains.



PRETTY BOY LLOYD

RICK NOETZEL

The teller wouldn't look at Lloyd. The Glock in his hand had all of her attention. He wagged the gun and grinned when her head mimicked his motion. "You listening?"

She nodded.

"Smart girl. You don't want to mess with me. Understand?"

She nodded faster, a blond-haired bobblehead.

"I'm in charge, right? You'll do what I say?"

"Yes." She paused. "Sir."

The rest of the bank's employees huddled against the wall behind her. "Nobody be a hero," Lloyd said, "and I'm out of here in a minute. Got that?" They muttered a ragged chorus of agreement, and he saw the fear in their eyes. A thrill, a snap of electricity traveled from the base of his brain to the small of his back. Lloyd Carew, large and in charge. He laughed at the thought. "Good. Very good. Now, darlin'—" He handed a bag to the teller. "—put the money in this. No alarms, no dye packs. I don't want—"

"Mayonnaise! How many times do I need to tell you—read the screen."

Lloyd jumped when Mr. Harvey tossed a cheeseburger on the preparation counter. "What? I was—"

"It's simple, Lloyd. We're a team: I take the orders; you fill the orders. I tell you what to do; you do it. Understand?"

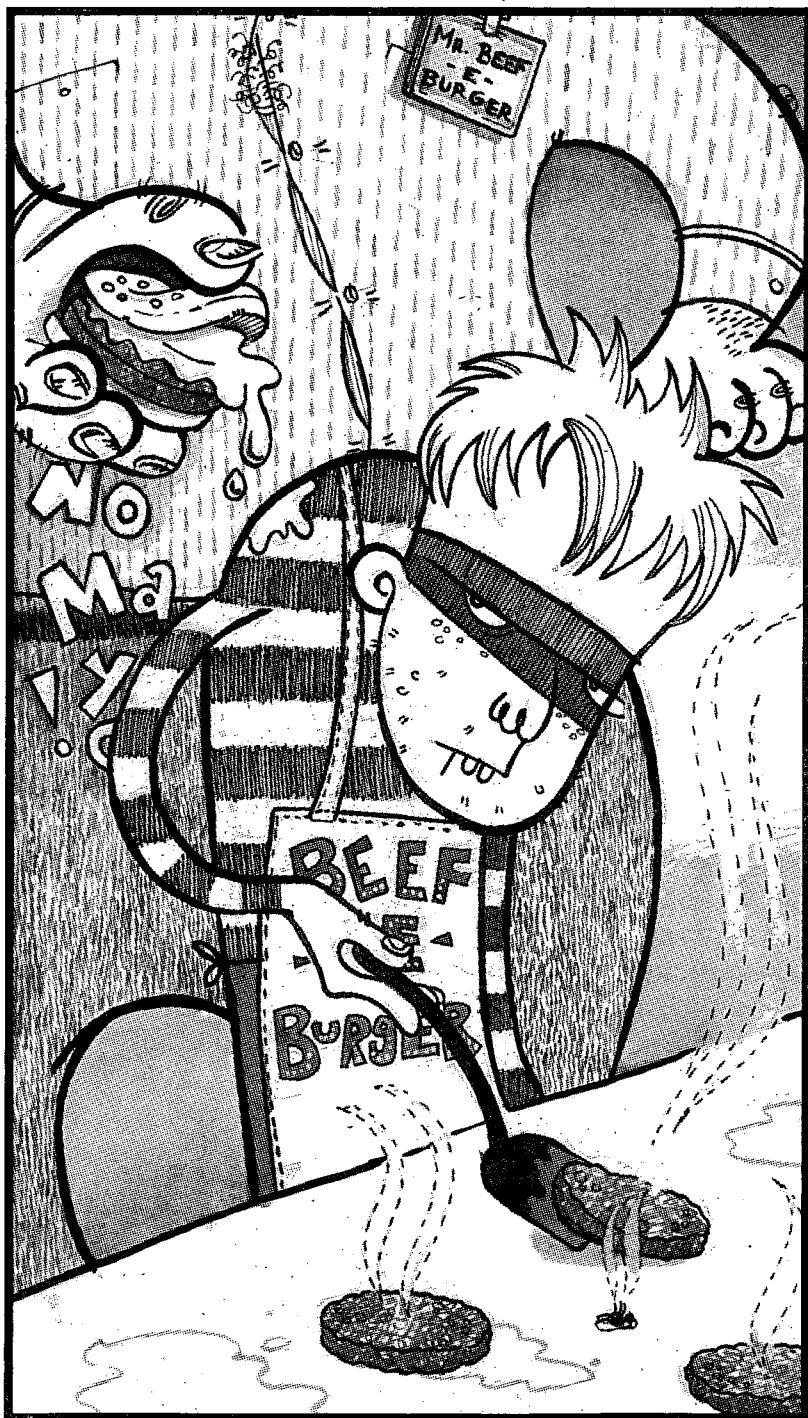
"Yeah, I hear you."

"Third time today, Lloyd. Beef-E-Burger doesn't pay you to screw up. Stop your daydreaming and get to work." He turned back to the customer.

Lloyd grabbed a bun and slid another cheeseburger onto the bottom half. "Just a lousy burger," he muttered.

"Harsh, dude," Calvin whispered from the fry cooker.

"Yeah," Lloyd said, "and I don't have to take that." Pickle, lettuce, onion, tomato/Ketchup, mustard, then the mayo. The training



Kelly Denato

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jingle ran through Lloyd's mind while his hands built the sandwich. "I got options."

"What you gonna do? Quit?"

"Maybe." He wrapped the burger and slid it down the chute to the front counter. "Check this out." Lloyd turned his back to the customers and pulled a knife from his pocket. He pressed the button on the black hilt and four inches of steel flashed under the fluorescent lights.

"Sweet! Where'd you get that?"

"Friend of mine went to New York with the marching band. He got it for me."

"What you gonna do with it?"

"I got some plans—big plans. No more working in places like this for chump change. Eight bucks an hour? That's nothing." A tingle, left over from his daydream, ran down his spine. "You heard about the Red Scarf Bandit? I'm gonna be like him."

"He robs banks, don't he?"

"Yeah, but he's got class. Apologizing to the teller, giving her a scarf—that's cool. Plus, he makes more in ten minutes than we do in a month."

"I— Harvey's coming." Calvin slid back to the deep fryer and pulled a basket of fries from the oil.

Lloyd closed the blade, slid the knife back into his pocket, and grabbed another hamburger bun. According to the order screen, he needed to make two Big-n-Beefy's with cheese.

"Lloyd." Mr. Harvey tapped his shoulder. "Remember that 'no mayo' burger? You put mayonnaise on it again."

"I did not. You're lying."

"You're fired, Lloyd. I'm tired of your screwups. I'm tired of your attitude. Punch the clock. You can pick up your check on Friday."

"You can't fire me for this."

"I can and I did. Now leave." Lloyd started to protest, but Mr. Harvey stopped him. "Quietly or I'll get *them*." He pointed at two cops eating lunch.

Lloyd exhaled heavily, pushed past Harvey, and left.

A steady stream of customers came to the Texaco. The clerk, a teenage girl, kept busy. Lloyd sat in his car, watching the people come and go.

"At least you're leaving your money," Lloyd said to himself. "More for me." He laughed, drained his beer, and tossed the can into the back seat. It rattled against other empties, four casualties

of the twelve-pack Lloyd was killing. He grabbed another beer from the box, opened the can, and tucked it between his legs. He leaned his head back, enjoying the warmth from the heater and watching his future cash get carried into the store. . . .

He sat up with a start. Warm beer sloshed out of the can and onto his jeans.

"Jesus," he said, picking up the can. "Looks like I pissed myself and—" He caught the clock out of the corner of his eye. Five after midnight. "Jesus," he repeated. "I fell asleep."

No customers were in the store, so Lloyd climbed out of the car and walked to the sliding doors. He almost cracked his nose when they didn't open. He stepped back and tried again. The doors stayed closed. Inside, the clerk glanced at Lloyd and returned to her magazine.

"Hey." Lloyd knocked on the glass. "Open up."

The girl motioned him down the sidewalk without looking up. Lloyd walked to a sliding drawer built into the wall. The clerk stood and grabbed a microphone.

"Store's closed. You buying gas? Gotta pay me first 'cause it's late."

"I need something inside. Can't you open the door for me?"

"Store closed at midnight."

"That was only five minutes ago. C'mon, I'll be quick."

"Store's closed."

Lloyd sighed. "Look, open the door."

The girl stared at him.

"I said, open up!" Lloyd banged his fist on the glass. "Now."

"I'll call the cops if you don't leave."

Lloyd pulled the knife out of his pocket and banged the hilt on the glass. "Open the damn door!" He hit the glass again. This time a piece of chrome popped off the knife and dropped onto the sidewalk. "Look at that—you broke my knife."

The clerk held the phone with white knuckles and stabbed at the buttons.

She's calling the cops, he thought. What a bitch! He ran back to his car and got in, sitting in a puddle of the spilled beer. "Jesus," he said and drove away.

Calvin bit into his burger. "She shot at you?"

"Damn straight. I knocked on the glass and she went all Vin Diesel on me. Pulled a cannon from out under the counter and blew the front window out of the store."

"Lucky she didn't kill you."

"Take more than that to kill me, buddy." Lloyd grabbed some of Calvin's fries. "Should be a law against guns, though."

"Why don't you get one?"

"Don't need it, man. Look at the best. Does Red Scarf need one? No." But Lloyd kept seeing the bank teller from his dreams and the look in her eyes.

"I don't recall 'the best' getting chased around a parking lot by some girl."

Lloyd ignored the insult. "I've got something different in mind this time."

A cold wind blew through the alley next to the grocery store, cutting through Lloyd's jacket. He stood in the shadows, blowing on his hands and watching the parking lot. Several cars were nearby, and this section of sidewalk wasn't visible from inside the store. Lloyd wanted the right person, and shivering in the dark, he wished the right person would hurry it up a bit.

An elderly couple, bundled in winter coats, left the market. He carried two plastic bags of groceries, and she held a purse the size of a suitcase. They shuffled along the sidewalk toward Lloyd.

"C'mon, people," Lloyd muttered. "I ain't got all night."

They stepped into the lot and stopped behind an old Buick. Lloyd sprinted across the pavement toward them when the woman began digging in her purse. He stopped behind them and opened his knife.

"Gimme your wallets."

They turned toward him. The woman pulled her hand from her purse, a key ring clenched in her fist.

"You first," Lloyd said, pointing the knife at the man.

"What?" He squinted at Lloyd. "What do you want?"

"Your wallet, old man. Give it up."

The man stared at Lloyd.

Lloyd stepped forward and pushed the man onto the trunk. The bags of groceries fell onto the pavement. "You deaf?"

The purse caught Lloyd behind his left ear and snapped his teeth together with a loud *clack*. He turned toward the woman and her second swing caught him flush on the nose. A flash of light filled his eyes and wet warmth covered his face. Lloyd yelped and grabbed his nose, dropping the knife.

"You broke my nose!"

"I'll break more than that," the woman said, "if you don't leave us alone."

A third strike landed on Lloyd's forearms and mashed his hand into his nose. The pain drove away the remnants of Lloyd's brav-

ery. He ran across the parking lot and disappeared behind the stores.

"Damn, man. You don't look too good." Calvin took a pull from his beer. "Those guys beat you up pretty good."

"Well, what did you expect? Four of them jumped me—I ain't Superman." Lloyd touched the bruises around his nose. "Looks bad, huh?"

"Like a raccoon. You never was very pretty. Less so, now." Calvin laughed and emptied his beer can. "They got your knife?"

Lloyd shrugged. "Don't matter. Red Scarf doesn't need any weapons. If he can do it, so can I."

"He doesn't use them, but you know for sure that he doesn't have one on him? I mean, just in case?"

Lloyd hadn't considered that idea. "Maybe you ain't so stupid after all."

Only two teller windows were open, but several people waited in the line. Lloyd was fourth. Worse than a grocery store, Lloyd thought.

He wore a hooded sweatshirt with a Georgia Tech logo on it. He hadn't gone to any college, much less Georgia Tech. He didn't even know anybody who went there. He just needed a warm jacket with big pockets in front.

Lloyd's hands were in those pockets. His left held a plastic grocery bag. His right held a small pistol. He'd bought the gun the day before for twenty-five dollars. It only held five bullets and nobody knew if it worked, but Lloyd didn't plan on shooting anybody.

The person at the front of the line went to an open teller and Lloyd shuffled a couple of feet. His fingers played with the gun. In his mind's eye, he pulled it out and pointed it at the frightened teller. "Don't be scared, my dear. Fill the bag and I'll be out of your hair." His voice was soft and soothing, like a radio commercial. "Just—"

"Next!"

Lloyd jumped. He released the gun and pulled his hands from the pockets, but his sleeve got caught and pulled the pistol out. It bounced off Lloyd's knee and clattered onto the floor next to the man in front of Lloyd. Lloyd looked at the gun; the man looked at Lloyd. They both dove onto the weapon.

Lloyd heard someone shout "gun" while he scrambled for the pistol. He had one hand around the grip and the other on the

customer's face when the gun went off. Red-hot pain shot up Lloyd's leg and he screamed, letting go of the gun. He rolled onto his back and grabbed his thigh. Above him, a security guard crouched with his gun drawn, and he was shouting. Another guard pointed his weapon at the other customer. The customer dropped Lloyd's gun and put his hands in the air.

"He had the scarf in his pocket?"

"The cops found it when they searched him. He said the gun wasn't his, but I don't think they believed him. I ain't fool enough to tell them that it's mine."

Calvin whistled. "Man, you are such a bad ass. What next—another bank? You need to get another gun first. I know this guy—"

Lloyd held up a hand. "Slow down. I've been shot, remember? I need to take it slow, lay low for a while." Lloyd felt the ache in his leg. Maybe forever, he thought.

"Good plan, bro. I'm glad Mr. Harvey let you come back to work."

"I'm a star. I'm the man who caught the Red Scarf Bandit." The monitor flashed a new order. "Now, get me two orders of fries while I make these burgers." 🦋



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THE DOG IN THE DAYTIME

JOHN H. DIRCKX

The tranquility of a glorious fall afternoon was abruptly shattered by the plaintive bellow of a beagle.

Lamar Cavendish scowled in distaste at the array of tweetters and woofers on the wall opposite him, as if a bagpiper had suddenly begun tweedling along with the string quartet whose impassioned efforts he had just been savoring. Cavendish was an expert at scowling in distaste. He did it well and did it often. That was one of several reasons why the people who worked for him were delighted that he chose to run his business from his home.

He shoved his executive swivel chair back from the computer and marched out through the open french window to the second-story deck. From here he could see over the intervening hedges into the garden next door, where his neighbor Wanda Jansen was weeding.

"Mrs. Jansen." He rapped out the name like a drill sergeant calling the roll. "Will you please get that obnoxious beast back on your own property?"

"He is on our property," said Mrs. Jansen, without bothering to look up from her work. "He's right here beside me, ready to protect me from intruders and other objectionable characters. Aren't you, Czar?"

"Well, if you think you need a dog for such purposes, you might at least get one that barks. That pathetic creature sounds like a goat drowning in a cistern."

"And if you have to play that pansy music all the time," countered Wanda Jansen, "you might at least shut your windows. What is that, Mozart's 'Funeral March'?"

Czar emitted another soulful whoop.

Cavendish shuddered. "Have you tried feeding him?" he demanded.

"He just had lunch an hour ago. Didn't you, Czar?"

"Well, if he doesn't shut up, *I'm* going to feed him something. Maybe some nice raw hamburger with a couple of broken light-bulbs well blended in."

Wanda Jansen put down her trowel and shaded her eyes with her hand as she glowered up at Cavendish. "If anything happens to this dog," she said, "we'll see you in court."

Cavendish snorted and retreated to his study with an eloquent slam of the french window.

The fine weather continued another couple of days, but Wednesday's forecast called for some rain by afternoon. When Dexter Jansen arrived home at ten that morning, he found Wanda waiting in the entry hall, dressed in the casual outfit she usually wore at the cabin.

"Everything okay at the plant?" she asked.

"Just the usual friction and incompetence. I probably shouldn't go near that place unless I'm planning to stay there for at least half the day. Have you got the stuff for lunch ready?"

"It's in the freezer, ready to go. Gerda has the day off. She'll be back at ten tomorrow."

"Is Czar in?"

"Of course he's in. We wouldn't want him to get our esteemed neighbor upset while we're away."

"You mean Cavendish?"

"Uh-huh. He was out there griping about him again Monday afternoon."

"What did Czar do this time—chase a squirrel up one of his trees?"

"Oh no, something much worse. He barked."

"Well, you've got to admit that when Czar gives forth with one of his foghorn solos, it isn't pretty."

"I don't have to admit anything, Dex. He's a dog, for heaven's sake. If Cavendish doesn't want to hear dogs barking, why doesn't he move out in the country somewhere?"

"Speaking of out in the country . . ." Jansen headed upstairs to change clothes.

Wanda followed at his heels. "What did you mean about a foghorn solo? I thought you liked Czar."

"He's all right, as beagles go," conceded Jansen. "But you've got to admit—"

"Stop telling me what I've got to admit." She flopped petulantly down on the foot of the bed, drawing anguished noises from the springs. "And watch how you hang up those pants, Dex. You're

making a crease with the hanger. No, the other leg—you're only making it worse."

"Look, Wanda, I don't want to fight with you about Czar. I mean, he's your dog, right? But who puts the drops in his eyes every morning and gives him his kidney shot twice a week?"

"Since when is he my dog?" Her hair kept falling into her eyes, from which she repeatedly either wiped it with a sweep of her hand or snapped it with a twitch of her head. "That shirt has a stain on the collar that the cleaners can't get out. I told you that last week. And, by the way, the traffic on the Interstate is getting heavier by the minute."

The stream of criticism and complaints continued with the dreary monotony of a dripping faucet.

At about five thirty that evening, Chase Witherspoon left his car running in the Jansens' driveway while he ran nimbly up to the porch with the evening paper. Happening to glance into the side yard, he saw the Jansens' dog lying motionless near the house. Investigation from a discreet distance convinced him that the dog was dead, apparently the victim of a severe head injury. He rang and knocked at the front door of the house without getting any response. Reluctant to lose any more time from his rounds, he called Public Safety on his cell phone and went on with his work.

The Public Safety dispatcher tried to reach the Jansens by phone and got an answering machine. It was just getting dark when, around six P.M., Patrolmen Fritz Dollinger and Carl Bystrom arrived at the Jansens'. Like Witherspoon, they failed to get a response when they rang and knocked at the front door.

While Bystrom was taking a closer look at the dog, Dollinger made a circuit of the sprawling stone house and found a ground floor sash window standing open. One of its panes had been scientifically taped and broken in.

The officers investigated further without venturing into the house. There were unmistakable traces of blood on the broken pane, presumably left there by an intruder who had been cut while reaching in to release the catch on the window. It had rained heavily from about noon to two P.M., and the rain had entered through the open window and soaked the marble sill and some upholstered furniture inside.

On the assumption that the house had been burglarized in the absence of the owners, the officers reported to headquarters and were instructed to remain at the scene until either an evidence technician or a detective arrived. While they were waiting they made a further search of the grounds and found two jewelry

boxes, soaking wet and empty, in the bushes flanking the formal garden.

Sergeant David Kestrel of the forensic lab arrived first. After helping the patrolmen cordon off a rectangular section of the sodden side yard surrounding the dead dog with plastic tape, Kestrel stepped inside the tape and took pictures. When he had repeated that process at the site of the break-in, they went carefully around the house in an unsuccessful search for a way to gain entrance without breaking something else.

Kestrel worked, as usual, in tight-lipped and self-absorbed silence. The others carried on a continual dialogue, pointing out observations, proposing or rejecting deductions, and suggesting courses of action. Eventually they decided to query the nearest neighbors as to where the Jansens might be found, and whether the dog belonged to them.

It was a neighborhood of huge wooded lots. Instead of crashing through hedges and fumbling through underbrush, Dollinger hiked along the twilight road to the closest house. Its resident, Lamar Cavendish, confirmed that the Jansens owned a large beagle and thought they were probably spending the day at their cabin.

He couldn't tell them where the cabin was, but he did happen to know that it didn't have a phone. He suggested that Dollinger try to catch somebody working late at Jansen's business, Jandex Pharmaceuticals, and ask if they knew the whereabouts of the cabin. The Jansens had no children or live-in domestics (Cavendish's phraseology). No, he hadn't heard or seen anything unusual, but then he'd been away for most of the day.

By the time Dollinger got back to the Jansen house, there had been sensational developments. Kestrel had picked the lock on the kitchen door and he and Bystrom had found the dead body of a woman lying in the passage between the kitchen and the formal dining room. She had been struck a savage blow in the right temple, presumably with the bloody hatchet that lay on the floor next to her. There was no one else in the house.

Around seven that evening Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived on the scene to take charge of the investigation, parking in the Jansens' driveway behind the van from the coroner's office. The Jansen property, like most of those in this very exclusive district, was wooded, landscaped, and formally gardened. The house was an immense and complicated structure of limestone trimmed with brick and wood.

Between the driveway and the house, Nick Stamaty of the coroner's office crouched on the wet lawn and used a flashlight to examine the slain dog, which was partly covered by a sheet of blue

plastic. It was an older animal, overfed and turning gray around the muzzle. Its leather collar had worn a shallow groove in the fur around its neck. The back of its head had been caved in by a violent blow with something heavy and probably sharp.

"You a dog lover, Cy?" asked Stamaty.

"Let me put it this way," Auburn said. "I've been bitten three times in the line of duty—so far."

Stamaty tucked the plastic sheet carefully around the inert form. "Just a prediction: If the TV cameras get a shot of this dog, the public outcry will be ten times louder than the reaction to what happened inside."

"So what did happen inside?"

"Come and take a look."

"Do you have to do the dog?"

"You mean take him in for an autopsy? No. Dr. Stapleton, the vet, does that. I just left him a message, but his clinic is up in Pascoe, and for all I know he may be out on a house call delivering three little pigs."

They walked around to the front of the house and entered a huge and opulent foyer with carved moldings and hanging lamps. Two leather-covered jewel boxes, still damp, stood open and empty on the ceramic tile floor. Stamaty led Auburn through an arched doorway and along a passage until further progress was barred by festoons of yellow plastic tape.

"You'll want to stay outside the tape," Kestrel called out in warning, exactly as if Auburn had been a chance bystander instead of a trained and experienced investigator like himself.

Kestrel was inside the tape on hands and knees, examining the floor around the body of a woman of about forty. She was slightly plump, with brown eyes just showing through half-closed lids, and her hair was the color of a milkshake, with frosted tips. She was wearing designer blue jeans and a sweatshirt. The wound in her right temple was pretty much like the one that had killed the dog. The presumptive weapon, a small hatchet with a narrow blade like a tomahawk and a worn hickory haft, lay on the polished parquet floor next to the body amid gouts and smears of blood.

"Do we have a positive ID?" asked Auburn.

"Wanda Jansen," said Kestrel. "Her purse is on that fancy desk in the entry hall. She matches the picture on the driver's license. I guess you saw the jewel cases out there? Dollinger and Bystrom found them in the bushes on the southeast side."

"Any progress on finding the husband?"

"Dollinger and Bystrom were working on that. They had to leave on a couple of calls, and they asked me to fill you in." Kestrel stood

up and reeled off his message like a schoolchild reciting a lesson learned by rote. "The next-door neighbor figured the husband might be at their cabin, but he didn't know where it was. Your guys called the husband's business downtown, drug company called Jandex, and found out the cabin is on the river up near Kerylhake. There's no phone there, so the sheriff's office is sending a deputy out to see if Jansen's there, and bring him in if he is."

Auburn turned to Stamaty. "Got a guesstimate on time of death?"

"She's cold—just about room temperature—and rigor is pretty well advanced. Say eight to ten hours."

"Looks like just one blow from behind, doesn't it? Any defensive wounds on her hands?"

"I don't see any. That looks like a blister on the back of her left arm. It'll be up to the pathologist to decide where it came from."

Kestrel had again been gyrating on elbows and knees with his nose a few inches from the floor. Now he sat back on his haunches and wordlessly pointed with his magnifying glass at a broad smudge of blood on the floor.

Auburn squatted to examine it at close range. "Crepe-soled shoe?"

"Possibly. But the shape doesn't look like a shoe to me, and I can't find any other footmarks from a crepe sole. I think it's something with a crackle finish, like maybe an attaché case or a camera case."

"Another jewelry box?"

"Possibly. The point is that a crackle finish isn't formed with a mold or a dye—it results from a physicochemical reaction, the way a dish of milk curdles." (Kestrel's conversation was liberally strewn with words like "physicochemical.") "So it's like a fingerprint. No two pieces are identical, and theoretically we should be able to match up this mark with whatever made it."

"Show me this break-in."

Kestrel stepped over the tape. Auburn followed him through three rooms garnished with antique furniture, pictures, statuary, gilt-edged mirrors, and tapestries. It was the kind of place where the size of the Persian rugs in each room had been carefully chosen so as to leave a generous border of inlaid wood floor showing.

The house was probably more than a hundred years old, but the windows had been replaced within the past generation. At least the broken one had. The pane nearest the catch had been taped on its outer surface with criss-crossing strips of one-inch-wide, black vinyl adhesive tape and broken inward with a blow from a heavy tool, possibly the murder weapon. The window was wide

open, and the rain that had fallen in the early afternoon had drenched the carpet and the back and one arm of an upholstered chair.

"Was the window all the way up like that?"

"Exactly," said Kestrel, and repeated the word twice as if to abolish forever any suspicion that he would alter anything of evidential significance at a crime scene.

It was now quite dark outside. The broad marble windowsill shone wetly in the light of a lamp, and a few shards of glass from the broken pane glinted here and there. Most of the glass fragments still clung to the lattice of black tape that the burglar had applied before knocking in the pane. Kestrel pointed out smears of blood on the inside of the window near the catch and dribbles on the wall below, where the overhanging sill had protected them from the rain.

"Maybe he wasn't such a pro if he cut his hand getting in," suggested Auburn.

"Or getting out again—since all the doors were locked. But it wasn't his hand. There isn't a fresh print anywhere here, and you can see traces of brown cotton fluff on the tape."

"So he was wearing gloves, and we're probably looking for a guy with a cut on his arm. Anything to see outside?"

"Around the window, no. But somebody rode a bike across the back yard before the rain started. There's no bike in the garage, and no bike rack on the back of the car in there." He paused to reflect. "But then, I don't believe I've ever seen a bike rack on a Bentley." Although he seemed to possess absolutely no sense of humor, Kestrel sometimes displayed a flair for unconscious irony.

Two sets of bike tracks—one going, one coming—led between the edge of the driveway and a toolshed that was partly concealed by trees. Auburn traced their course by flashlight. Trimmings from bushes, still green, and a few dead tree branches had been heaped roughly next to the shed. In shady places where the grass was thin, the bike tires had left deep impressions in the soil, and some of these still contained miniature puddles from the rain. But there were no traces of mud at a point where the tires must have passed over the concrete driveway, even in some places where the canopy over the garage doors had protected the concrete from the rain. Hence the tracks in the earth must have been made before the rain started.

Auburn spent a quarter of an hour wandering through the house looking for evidence of damage or theft. He found priceless antiques and works of art in every room, most of them of a size and shape that only a crew of professional movers with a dolly and

a van could have removed. A substantial part of the basement had been adapted as living quarters for the dog.

Kestrel was preparing casts of the bike tracks in the back yard when Auburn set off by car to visit the next-door neighbor. The landscaping at Cavendish's was more austere than at the Jansens', and the house, instead of sprawling over half an acre of ground, thrust skyward with an eruption of chimneys and turrets. Cavendish himself came to the door and admitted Auburn to a dark and chilly hall that was about as inviting as a burial vault.

Auburn showed identification.

"Another policeman," mused Cavendish. He was fiftyish and angular, with a stiff, jerky carriage, like something put together with sticks and rubber bands. "What all did they get away with over there?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How much loot did the burglars get? The cop who was here earlier this evening told me they killed the dog, but he didn't know if anything had been stolen."

"We still don't have any definite information on that. But when the first officers on the scene entered the house they found a homicide victim."

"You mean—somebody was killed?"

"Yes, sir. Do you know the Jansens well?"

"Not well, no." Cavendish swallowed hard. "Who—who's dead?"

"Mrs. Jansen."

"Why don't we step in here and sit down?" They went into a morning room and sat in leather chairs before an empty stone fireplace.

"How was she killed?"

"Same way as the dog—a blow to the head with a hatchet."

Cavendish nodded like a man whose worst fears have been confirmed. "It's just come to me that I know who killed her. I saw him and talked to him myself."

"Yes, sir?"

"This morning a ragged-looking sort of fellow turned up in my driveway on a bike. Spun me some tale about how he lost his job and his little girl needed an operation—you know the sort of thing. Said he'd trim all my hedges for whatever I wanted to give him. Well, it so happens that my landscaping service just did the hedges a couple of weeks ago, as this chap could have seen for himself if he'd taken the trouble to look at them first.

"So I told him I didn't have any work for him, and then I—"
Cavendish paused as if he were overcome by the recollection of what he had done. "And then I made the mistake of telling him it

was no use trying at the Jansens' because they weren't home. I mean, I didn't necessarily swallow his story about his daughter needing surgery, but I never dreamed that he might be an out-and-out criminal."

"They don't wear badges," said Auburn. "Things would be a lot easier for us if they did. The traveling handyman con is a hardy perennial. Sometimes they're just casing the property, looking for a house with lots of portable loot and not much security. Sometimes they wedge a lock on an exterior door or a catch on a ground floor window so they can come back after dark and walk right in. Sometimes they disable an alarm system . . . How did you know the Jansens weren't home?"

"Because I'd just seen them drive away. I work in a study up above here that's got a lot of windows, and when I feel the need for inspiration I look off to the horizon. Some time around ten this morning I saw their blue van go down the driveway and turn left on Poplar Grove." He paused reflectively. "Never quite understood how Jansen could run off so often—golfing, tennis, sailing, loafing around that cabin of theirs. His business must practically run itself."

"Did you see the man with the bicycle going over to their house?"

"No, I can't say I did. But when I looked over that way a few minutes later, there he was whacking and chopping away at their bushes. He didn't have any tools of his own with him, so I took it for granted that they must have been home after all, or at least one of them was, and were letting him use their tools. That's why it didn't occur to me, when the police officer was here earlier this evening, that this fellow on the bike might have been their burglar."

"What time was it when you saw him working in their yard?"

"I didn't look at the clock, but it had to have been before eleven, because that's when I left for downtown."

"Did you happen to see their dog over there then, or hear it barking?"

"No." Cavendish made a face. "But then, it never did bark. Just kind of bleated, like a sheep having its throat cut. If I thought about it at all, I guess I figured they were going to be away overnight and took the dog with them."

"Did anyone besides yourself see this man?"

"Nobody here did. I'm not married, and the people who do my cleaning and cooking weren't here today because I always have lunch and dinner downtown on Wednesdays."

Auburn took out a three-by-five-inch file card and entered Cavendish's full name and his number on Poplar Grove Drive.

"Can I get your business address?" (One didn't ask residents of this neighborhood where they "worked.")

"The factory is on Hanover Road, but our offices are in the Lasky Tower downtown. We make mechanical and electronic timers and counters for high-speed production machinery and presses." He rattled off the information as if he were quoting a stock prospectus. "I usually work here at home except, as I said, on Wednesdays."

"I'd like you to give me as complete a description as you can of this man with the bike. Approximate age, build, complexion, hair color, what he was wearing, what kind of bike it was."

Cavendish puckered his brows and closed his eyes. "I'll tell you about the bike first. It's old. No gearing, no handbrake levers. And it squeaks."

"Any idea about color?"

"Somewhere under the mud and rust, I think I saw some maroon or purple trim. Kind of a sporty model when it was new—back in the fifties."

"Lights, reflectors, cargo carriers, water bottle?"

Cavendish closed his eyes again briefly. "None of the above. Heck, it didn't even have a kickstand. He left it leaning against a tree." Auburn made notes, hoping that Cavendish would turn out to be as good an observer of people as he was of machines.

The description he gave of the man with the bike proved equally rich in detail. White, in his early forties, clean shaven one day last week, light brown or sandy hair needing a trim. Fair complexion, but tanned on the cheeks, the back of the neck, and the backs of the hands. Medium height and build, dark blue work clothes, dirty white sneakers. Sunglasses, no jewelry or wristwatch, no backpack. A hangdog manner and a whining, wheedling voice.

"Do you expect to be home for the rest of the evening?" Auburn asked.

"Should be."

"An evidence technician may come by later to check for bicycle tracks on your property. He'll get your permission before he does any exploring."

When Auburn arrived back at the Jansen property he returned to the toolshed for a closer look. He had moved on to the house and was examining the damaged window from outside when a violent uproar commenced somewhere within. "Dead! She's dead!" screamed a man's voice, shrill with hysteria. "I did this. This is all my fault. I killed her. Wanda, Wanda!"

Auburn broke into a run. By the light of a pole lamp next to the

driveway, he saw a sheriff's cruiser parked behind his own car. He dashed up the front steps and through the entry hall.

The man was still ranting, "This is all my doing!" and lurching frantically up and down the passage where the body lay under the silent guard of Nick Stamaty.

Deputy Theodore Church stood in a doorway droning "Steady there, sir. Steady," in his deep bass voice. Like Auburn, Church was African American. Unlike Auburn, he was irascible, chafed under authority, and tended to hassle witnesses with the rude pertinacity of a telemarketer.

Kestrel appeared from somewhere at the back of the house and added to the atmosphere of melodrama by shouting at Church, "Heavens above, man! You don't just let a suspect wander into a crime scene!" For a fleeting instant Auburn marveled at how differently Kestrel and he were put together. While he was steeling himself for an interview with the bereaved husband, all Kestrel could think about were his precious bloodstains and specimen envelopes full of dirt.

"This is her husband," Church was growling back at Kestrel. "He lives here."

Stamaty, who assisted at scenes like this day in and day out, had developed a style of calming overwrought people that was somewhere between the gentle compassion of a clergyman and the more sinewy benevolence of a kids' camp counselor. He steered Jansen into the kitchen, sat him down, rooted through cupboards, and started brewing coffee.

Meanwhile, Auburn conferred with Deputy Church, who was squatting just outside Kestrel's tape barrier and examining Wanda Jansen's fatal wound with professional detachment.

"Where exactly is this cabin?" asked Auburn.

"On County Road LL, which runs up along the river out of Kerylhake. If I hadn't seen his van there, I would have quit beating on the door long before he ever heard me."

"What was he doing?"

"Sleeping off a jag. Man, the dude is wasted. After about ten minutes in the car with him I started seeing double myself."

"What's his story?"

"Him and her had a fight this morning and he took off for the cabin by himself."

Subdued sobbing came intermittently from the kitchen.

"Didn't you tell him she was dead?"

"I told him the dog was dead and his wife was hurt. Per departmental protocol."

Church suddenly remembered a staff meeting where he was overdue and vanished.

Auburn found Dexter Jansen hunched over the kitchen table, staring bleakly into the steam rising from his coffee cup. He had shaggy blond hair and a craggy, doltish, fashion-model face with a figure to match, wide shouldered and wasp waisted. Auburn thought it highly unlikely that he had murdered his wife with a hatchet, much less broken into his own house to do it, but he took particular note of the fact that Jansen's arms and forearms, left bare by a rumpled T-shirt, showed no cuts or dressings.

"I'm sorry I have to bother you at a time like this," said Auburn, "but I'm sure you understand that I'm just trying to do my job. When you first came in, you said—"

"I was out of my head. Still am. I didn't mean I actually killed her—just that it was my fault she was dead." His speech was slurred and his manner maudlin, but the shock of seeing his wife dead seemed to be sobering him up fast. "Because if I'd been here, maybe it wouldn't have happened. Or maybe they would have got me instead."

He wanted to castigate himself for leaving this morning, to sing the virtues and glories of his dead wife, to talk himself through the first bleak stages of his grief. Not without considerable effort, Auburn got him to sort out the chronology of the past few hours.

"We were going to close up the cabin for the winter. We always put shutters over the windows to keep out animals and protect the place from vandals. Wanda and I got into a fight—one of those stupid little arguments that just snowball and turn ugly until something has to give. I walked out and headed for the cabin."

"You say you had a fight—"

"Oh, nothing physical. She was perfectly all right when I left—just furious."

"About what time would that have been?"

"I don't know, probably a few minutes after ten. When I got to the cabin I put up one shutter and then I started drinking. Started and couldn't stop. By noon I was ready to come home, but I was too drunk to drive and not drunk enough to try it anyway. Even if I'd made it here, it would probably have been too late, wouldn't it? What time did . . ."

"That'll be up to the medical examiner to determine. Probably before noon."

Jansen nodded introspectively. "Anyway, I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew it was getting dark and the sheriff was trying to break the door down."

"We found two empty jewel cases outside on the grounds."

Jansen nodded. "I saw them in the hall. Those are Wanda's."

"It would help if you could give us an exact description of what's missing. The sooner we act, the better chance we have of recovering the stolen goods before they're broken up and dispersed. Do you have an inventory that you or your wife prepared for your insurance company?"

"Probably. But I don't care about the jewelry any more. It's not mine—it's Wanda's, and she's . . ." He shook his head in mute grief.

"One of your neighbors noticed your van leaving this morning."

Jansen glanced at Auburn quickly and then looked away again. "Cavendish. The neighborhood busybody and tattletale. He sits up there in his ivied tower spying on everybody."

"He also mentioned seeing a man trimming your bushes."

"Our bushes? When was this?"

"Probably between ten and eleven, a little after you left."

"Today? That's baloney. Our lawn service hasn't been here since the grass stopped growing a couple of weeks ago. If they turned up unexpectedly, Wanda would have sent them packing."

"Do you keep your toolshed locked?"

"No. Is something missing from there too?"

"Not necessarily. But Mr. Cavendish saw this man using tools, and he didn't seem to have any with him when he offered to work for Cavendish a few minutes earlier. I don't know if you noticed the hatchet . . . ?"

"That's mine. Is that what they used?"

"That's how it looks." Auburn went on with more routine questions about conflicts with neighbors, people at Jansen's business, other robberies, threats, problems with vandalism in the neighborhood, all of which elicited negative responses.

After producing an inventory of Wanda's jewelry, Jansen walked through the house with Auburn looking for further evidence of theft or damage. To the list of missing items he added a handwoven woolen blanket from the master bedroom, which the murderer had probably used to wrap up his loot, and between five and ten dollars' worth of change that had been taken from a leaded crystal dish on top of Jansen's bureau. Apparently nothing with a crackle finish had been removed from the house.

Before leaving the Jansens', Auburn alerted Kestrel to the possibility of finding fingerprints on the leaded crystal dish and bike tracks at Cavendish's place. He then spent half an hour canvassing the neighborhood in a fruitless search for somebody besides Cavendish who had seen the itinerant handyman on the rusty bicycle.

On his way back to headquarters, he started formulating a

strategy. Arriving there a little after nine P.M., he reported to the second watch commander, Lieutenant Ryan, who agreed with him that they should make an effort to get a description of the killer on the eleven o'clock news yet that night. Ryan dispatched a police artist to see Cavendish immediately.

"Could the husband have killed her before he left?" asked Ryan.

"And killed the dog and faked the burglary? I guess so."

"In that case you might want to get a warrant and search that cabin for the missing jewelry."

Auburn nodded. "But this neighbor, Cavendish, did see a suspicious character in their back yard—"

"Sure, and gave one of the most detailed descriptions I've seen in twenty-five years of police work."

"You think Cavendish invented the handyman? I can't see him killing a neighbor woman with a hatchet and stealing her jewelry."

"Maybe he and the husband are in it together. Jansen gets rid of his wife, Cavendish doesn't have to listen to the dog any more, and they split the payoff on the jewelry from the insurance company."

Auburn opened a new computer file and entered a narrative of his investigation up to the present moment. He sent an e-mail message to Records incorporating Cavendish's description of the handyman and asking if the description or the M.O. matched any recent complaints or crime reports. He also requested background probes on Wanda and Dexter Jansen and Lamar Cavendish. The police artist's sketch of the handyman and another of his bike duly appeared on the news that evening at eleven.

On arriving at the office next day, Auburn found answers to most of his inquiries waiting on his desk. Cavendish owned a thriving manufacturing firm called Marketyme. Jansen's company, Jandex Pharmaceuticals, dealt in wholesale vaccines and biologicals, supplying local pharmacies, physicians, and hospitals. Neither had any criminal records, except that four years ago Jansen had been fined heavily for his involvement in a drug scam. His firm and three others had been found guilty of triggering a local meningitis scare in the media in order to ensure that a manufacturer's overrun of pediatric vaccine would be bought and used before its expiration date.

Wanda Jansen had died between nine and eleven A.M.—hence quite possibly before Jansen's departure for the cabin. The cause of death was cerebral laceration and hemorrhage resulting from one or maybe two blows to the right temple from a heavy tool with a cutting edge. The blister on her left arm was of unknown cause, and had occurred either after death or immediately before,

since there was no microscopic evidence of inflammatory reaction in the surrounding tissues.

The hatchet found near the body contained traces of Wanda's blood and hair. It also contained traces of blood and fur from the dog. The stains on and around the broken window matched neither Wanda's nor Czar's blood. Eventually Jansen's blood type would need to be determined, but there was no hurry about that. According to the Weather Bureau, it had rained almost continuously from 11:50 A.M. to 2:10 P.M. yesterday.

While Auburn was importing this new data into the Jansen file, the dispatcher called to tell him that he had two visitors downstairs.

"Any idea what it's about?"

"They said the break-in and homicide on Poplar Grove."

"Send them up." He put the finishing touches to the file, saved it, and had blanked his monitor screen by the time the visitors arrived.

Auburn's heart sank when he saw the two people who walked into his office. Whether they were journalists, psychics, or amateur sleuths, they clearly didn't belong to the mainstream of civilized society. Maybe this was the first wave of the public reaction to the killing of the dog that Stamaty had predicted.

The man bustled in first, a chunky little creature in tweeds with a face like a squirrel, curly sideburns, and a cloth cap rolled up and stuffed in a side pocket. "Thank you for seeing us so promptly," he said. "I'm Tibor Preene and this is Elsie Fascinato."

His companion slithered into the office and closed the door behind her with a gesture and a roll of the eyes borrowed from some spy movie of the 1960s. She had a round pasty face like a dumpling that tapered gradually down into her neck, with only a reddish nubbin showing where her chin should be. Auburn couldn't be sure whether her outfit represented high fashion or sheer lunacy. Her blouse looked like a worn-out mail bag and her toredor pants might have been painted on her legs.

They both presented business cards, identical except for the names. Above an unmistakable silhouette of Sherlock Holmes with deerstalker cap and calabash pipe, each card bore the embossed inscription, THE ARTIFICIAL KNEE-CAPS OF WILMOT, and beneath it the quotation, "*There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.*—The Boscombe Valley Mystery." Auburn studied the cards and glanced up in bewilderment.

"As you can see," said Preene, "we're Sherlockians—devotees of the immortal Holmes. Our group is the newest branch of an international organization called The Baker Street Irregulars. Each branch takes its name from some person or thing mentioned in

one of the Holmes tales." He gave a little snorting laugh. "Well, in all candor, by the time we formed our unit a few months ago, we were scraping the bottom of the proverbial. Artificial knee-caps come up in 'The Red-Headed League,' so there we were."

They seated themselves opposite Auburn's desk and the woman produced papers from a very thin attaché case of purple plastic. Were they about to ask him to join their club, sign a petition against Sunday liquor, buy chances on a Christmas goose . . . ?

"I understood you wanted to see me about the Jansen burglary and homicide?" he asked.

"Correct," said Ms. Fascinato. "In one of the tales in the canon, Holmes draws the attention of a police inspector 'to the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime.' After our monthly meeting last night, we were sitting around watching the news and we got to talking about this murder case of yours where the dog was also killed, and we drew up a list of points about that dog that we think need your attention."

"Every little bit helps," Auburn remarked, striving to maintain an amiable tone and manner, even though people like these were on his list of models that urgently needed to be recalled by the Manufacturer.

"According to the news," said Elsie Fascinato, "Wanda Jansen died about noon. When did the dog die?"

Auburn opened his mouth to tell her that that information was still pending from the veterinarian who had performed an autopsy on the dog, but she plunged right on to her next question, and the next, running her left thumb down the margin of the list as she read them off.

"Where did the dog die? Why was it roaming around loose? It wasn't on a chain, and in that neighborhood people don't put up with such things. Could it have been killed indoors and the body moved outside?"

When she stopped for breath, Preene immediately took over, skewing himself sideways in his chair to read over her shoulder. "Where was the dog while the mysterious man with the bicycle was trimming the bushes? Did the dog bite the burglar, and is that why he bled on the window? If the burglar killed the dog to silence it, he must have at least suspected there was somebody in the house. Then why did he let himself be surprised by the woman, and why did he kill her with such a clumsy weapon as a hatchet?"

Preene sat back in his chair and smiled pontifically to indicate that that exhausted the list.

"Those are some interesting questions," agreed Auburn. "We

have answers to some of them already. Others we may never be able to answer."

"I can see that you're a right-brainer," said Elsie Fascinato. Her eyes kept sweeping the room like twin searchlights, never quite meeting Auburn's. "Get the big picture—wait for inspiration—not much of a head for intricate details. But as the master said, 'To a great mind, nothing is little.'" She handed him the list of questions and they rose to depart.

Auburn thanked them with forced cordiality.

"Only our civic duty," Preene assured him suavely. "Because, you see, it's an article of faith with us that official police detectives are just a bunch of blundering fools, loitering with intent to commit detection but utterly clueless— Had you going there for a moment, didn't I, Officer?"

Niles Webster parked his car on a cul-de-sac off Wade Avenue, lifted his rusty one-speed off the rack mounted on the trunk lid, and pedaled four blocks west along Wade before starting to pay serious attention to the houses. Turning onto Lynn Circle, he passed up the first property on the left because of the burglar alarm warning prominently displayed at the front gate. The second house was small and in poor repair and its side yard was cluttered with toys, all of which suggested a shortage of negotiable valuables within. The third had no yard to speak of, much less any trees or bushes to trim.

The fourth house looked more promising: two luxury cars in the driveway and a deep back yard completely surrounded by exuberantly unkempt shrubbery. The mailbox bore the name COSSANIC. Just as Webster braked to a squawking halt in the driveway, a woman in her middle thirties opened a side door and tossed some table scraps to a pair of cats.

"Morning, ma'am," said Webster, bowing his head and hunching his shoulders in a gesture of respect and servility that had cost him much effort to perfect. "I was wondering if you'd like me to trim your bushes around the back."

Jennifer Cossanic looked him over a little dubiously. "My nephew usually does them, but he's been so busy with his first year of high school, and soccer practice—"

"It wouldn't have to be the bushes," said Webster. "I'll chop and stack firewood, do your gutters and downspouts, clean out your attic or basement—any kind of work really, and I'll do it for whatever you want to give me." He hung his head a bit lower and injected a tearful note into his voice. "See, when I got laid off about

eight weeks ago I lost my health insurance. My little girl has this spinal condition, and they want to operate, but—" He swallowed a sob. "I'm telling you, it just about breaks my heart to see her lying there on the couch every day . . ."

"Well," said Mrs. Cossanic, "our bushes are certainly overdue for a pruning. Why don't you start with them, and then we'll see what else we can find to keep you busy? You don't have any tools with you, do you?"

"No, ma'am," admitted Webster with a pathetic little laugh. "I'm traveling kind of light."

"That's all right. I'm sure we can find whatever you need in the garage. If you'll just go along the driveway and around to the back, I'll meet you there."

It was three or four minutes before Mrs. Cossanic put up the overhead door from inside and pointed out the gardening tools hanging on brackets along one wall of the garage. In the meantime, she had dialed 911 and been instructed not to allow the man inside the house but to make every reasonable effort to keep him there until a squad car arrived. She noticed that, while waiting for her to open the garage, Webster had donned a pair of brown cotton work gloves.

Patrolmen Terry Krasnoy and Jake Schottel made a silent approach—so silent that Webster didn't know they had come up behind him until Krasnoy said, "Excuse me, sir."

Krasnoy kept his distance in case the man decided to use the pruning shears in his hands as an offensive weapon. But he proved perfectly docile. When asked to show identification, he produced an expired Delaware driver's license bearing the name of Niles Webster, age thirty-seven.

"You're a long way from home, Mr. Webster," said Krasnoy. "How long you been on the road?"

"Sir?" Webster hung his head in an attitude of abject humility like a Sunday school pupil who can only remember half of the Commandments.

"You didn't come very far on that bike. Where's your car?"

"I parked her a few streets back. She's got a hole in the muffler, and that kind of turns folks off."

"Where are you staying?"

"Been kind of living in the car."

"Let's go take a look at it."

"Well, I've kind of got a job to finish here."

"Sir, I'm going to ask you to turn around, step away from the fence, and put your hands up against it while Officer Schottel goes over your pockets."

Schottel discovered a bulge up Webster's right sleeve. On investigation, this proved to consist of several layers of facial tissue stained with dried blood and held in place with strips of one-inch-wide black vinyl adhesive tape. "What happened to your arm?"

"Cut it on that muffler."

Webster made no difficulty about directing them to his car, a battered relic held together with odd scraps of wire and more black tape. In the back seat they found containers of food in various stages of decomposition and a rat's nest of rumpled clothing and wadded blankets, including a hand-woven woolen one that matched the description of the coverlet missing from the Jansens' bedroom.

The trunk yielded a well-worn stock of jimmies, wrecking bars, sledgehammers, and other housebreaking tools. Stashed in jars and bottles in a tackle box were thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry.

Webster was arrested and booked on charges of murder and grand larceny. By the time Cyrus Auburn, returning from lunch, first learned of Webster's existence, he was already represented by C. J. Pulfresh, Esq., a defense attorney with a penchant for sordid cases that got maximum press. Pulfresh was clamoring for an immediate court appearance so he could post bail and get his client back on the street.

Auburn discussed the evidence against Webster with the arresting officers in great detail. Webster's car and bicycle were on their way to the police garage, where Kestrel would go over them as soon as he finished going over the black plastic tape and the brown cotton gloves found on Webster's person.

Auburn decided to review the case with Rick McEwen of the city prosecutor's office before even attempting to interview Webster in the presence of his attorney. McEwen was young and energetic and hadn't been at the game long enough yet to have had the idealism wholly burned out of him by the exorbitant percentage of felony arrests that never came to trial. He agreed to let Auburn conduct the interview with Webster. They met with the prisoner and his lawyer in an interrogation room.

Niles Webster impressed Auburn as a man who had got himself knocked around a great deal through either bad luck or bad judgment. His long wavy hair, brushed back over his ears, was just turning gray, and there was a grayish cast as well to his stubbly cheeks. His brows were heavy and the bridge of his nose was so broad that he looked cross-eyed. He held his jaw sharply to one side and stared straight ahead at nothing with an expression of sullen resentment, as if Fate had just played him yet another dirty trick.

"Mr. Webster, I'm Sergeant Auburn. I'm going to ask you a few questions. You've already been cautioned that anything you say may be taken down in writing and introduced as evidence during court proceedings, but if you have any doubts about anything, you can confer privately with Mr. Pulfresh before answering."

Pulfresh, whose complexion was exactly the color of a boiled lobster, scowled vigilantly at his client's elbow. Pouches of skin under his eyes stuck out like windowsills. "Do you understand that?"

Webster bobbed his head to signify his comprehension and fingered a heavy brass cross suspended from his neck on a leather thong.

"Were you aware that your driver's license expired about eight months ago?"

"It must have slipped my mind," said Webster. "I haven't been back home for a while."

"The police in Middletown are still wondering what you did with that—"

"Let's let the police back in Middletown take care of things that happen in their jurisdiction," said Pulfresh, in his usual noisy and abrasive fashion.

"Where were you yesterday, Mr. Webster?"

"I don't know, working someplace. I do mostly yard work this time of year."

"Do you remember doing some yard work at a big house on Poplar Grove Drive?"

"Street names I wouldn't remember. I did some trees and bushes at a big house, yes."

"Was that where you picked up the jewelry we found in your trunk?"

Pulfresh put his hand on Webster's arm to enjoin silence. He threw Auburn and McEwen a derisive grimace. "It's not going to be that easy," he said.

Every time Auburn had just about decided to sign up for the Law School Admission Test, he had an encounter with an attorney like Pulfresh and scrapped the whole idea. It wasn't so much what Pulfresh was doing. That, after all, was his professional duty to his client. It was the attitude he conveyed—as if he and his colleagues at the Bar were the duly appointed custodians of the Law, whereas in fact they did everything they could to bend, sidestep, misrepresent, and subvert that Law, which it was Auburn's sworn duty to preserve and enforce.

"Did you work at just that one house yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember who you talked to there?"

Webster gazed at the grimy table before him and ran his thumb back and forth over the brass cross as if it were a talisman. "A woman, I think."

"Where did you talk to this woman? Inside the house or outside?"

"In the back yard."

"Do you remember how much you got paid?"

"Yes, sir, I remember that. Twenty dollars. And by the time I put half a tank of gas in the car and had some lunch, every penny of it was gone."

"Around what time did you leave there, would you say?"

"Couldn't say for sure. Maybe about eleven."

"Do you think it's possible you might have cut your arm on a broken window at that house?"

"No, I did that trying to patch a hole in the muffler on my car."

"Would you mind if we had a technician draw some blood so we could run some tests?"

"We certainly *would* mind," said Pulfresh. "We'll tolerate no such bodily assault or invasion of privacy. Unless you have a court order."

"Until we have a court order," said McEwen.

"Did you have any trouble with the dog?" asked Auburn.

Pulfresh put up both hands as if to ward off a blow. "Okay, that's it," he said. He pointed one index finger at Auburn and the other at McEwen. "We need to have a conference. Just the three of us."

They left Webster in the custody of the stenographer and went next door to talk. "I want a lie detector test right now," said Pulfresh.

"Before the hearing?" asked McEwen.

"Before you talk to him any more. Because, little by little, you're going to feed this mug most of the evidence you've got against him. And at the hearing you're going to spill all of it. And the less Webster knows, the better chance he has of passing a polygraph test. This guy is functionally illiterate and he's got the morals of a maggot, but I don't think he killed that dog, much less the woman. He didn't even know there was a murder charge against him until I got here."

"Has he got you conned, C. J.," asked McEwen, "or are you trying to con us?"

"Neither one. I'm ready to do some serious plea bargaining here, but I need that polygraph test first. You may be able to place him at the scene, but I don't believe you can prove the murder."

McEwen looked at Auburn. "Sure, we can run a polygraph. But don't blame us if it hangs your client."

Sergeant Sandra Moffat, a licensed polygraph technician, was summoned back early from lunch to perform the examination. "That's okay," she said, smiling with characteristic joviality, "I didn't need that pie anyway," and she went right on smiling even when nobody contradicted her.

Pulfresh wanted to dictate the questions Moffat would ask, and he wanted to be present during the test, but both requests were denied. They did let him sit in on the selection of the questions, and scrapped one or two of them to placate him. Webster, who saw the handwriting on the wall, answered as frankly as was possible for an inveterate liar. Although he dodged and twisted when replying to queries about the break-in and burglary, it was perfectly evident that he really didn't know anything about the killing of the woman and the dog.

He now denied ever having talked to anybody at the Jansens', much less having been paid anything for working there. The story he told Moffat was that, although he had found no one home at the Jansens', he had started working on their bushes, with tools borrowed from their unlocked shed, in hopes of receiving some recompense when they came home—which they never did. He admitted eventually breaking a window and lifting some jewelry boxes. The dog, which he had found shut in the house, had fled from his presence and made its escape through the open window.

Webster and his lawyer agreed to plead guilty to charges of breaking and entering and grand larceny if the charges of homicide and killing the dog were dropped. McEwen bought the deal but added the proviso that Webster must submit to having a blood sample drawn immediately instead of waiting for a court order.

The case had received so much media attention that it was a simple matter for McEwen to squeeze a preliminary hearing onto Judge Middlefield's schedule before the end of the day. The judge denied Pulfresh's application for bail and bound Webster over to the grand jury on the burglary charges. This was all very well for the cause of justice, but it left Auburn without a murder suspect.

By Friday morning the notion that Dexter Jansen might have killed his wife before driving off to the cabin seemed a little more compelling than before. According to Jansen, he'd left his wife alone at the house around ten o'clock Wednesday morning. Yet Webster insisted that at approximately the same time there was no one there, and the polygraph, for what it was worth, backed up that statement.

Auburn looked up The Artificial Knee-Caps of Wilmot and learned that Fascinato was a paralegal and that Preene sold pianos

and organs. He got out their list of questions and read it over again.

He didn't call Jansen before visiting Poplar Grove Drive again. His ring at the door was answered by Gerda Schlegel, the cook-housekeeper. Jansen was fidgeting in the foyer while waiting for a taxi to take him to the cabin so that he could retrieve his van.

"I've been up to my ears all morning in people," he said. "Funeral director, insurance investigator, reporters . . ."

"I won't keep you long. I just had a couple more questions."

"I've got some for you. I hear this creep Webster isn't being charged with murder."

"That's correct, sir. There's no doubt he burgled your house and took your wife's jewelry, and we think we can prove those charges in court. But we really have no case against him for the murder."

"That I don't understand." Jansen stood toying with papers and unopened mail on the ornamental escritoire in the entry hall. "I mean, who else could have killed her? He was here, Wanda was here, he broke in, he killed the dog—"

"We don't know about the dog. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. Where was the dog when you left yesterday morning?"

"Here in the house. We never let him out unless one of us was right there with him. The neighbors would have lynched us—one of them, anyway." Score a point for The Artificial Knee-Caps. "Why the interest in Czar?"

"My interest in your dog is only indirect. If we knew a little more about when or why he was killed, it might help to clear up your wife's death. You say he would have been indoors, yet apparently he was killed outside."

"Sure, because the burglar had just opened a window."

"Would the dog have gone after the burglar?"

"Not Czar. He was anything but a watchdog. He ran away from strangers."

"Then what would have been the point of killing him?"

"Well, for that matter, what was the point of killing Wanda?"

"You're starting to see my problem. I have to wonder if the dog was killed to give the false impression that your wife had been killed by a stranger."

Jansen didn't pretend he couldn't see where this was leading. "You're practically accusing me of killing Wanda myself," he said.

"Just bear with me, sir. Please understand that catching criminals is only half of my job. The other half is helping to clear the innocent. Now, whether we like it or not, as the husband of the victim, you're on the list of suspects."

"Sure, I understand that. Except at the time Wanda was killed, I was blind drunk and twenty-two miles away."

"We don't know exactly when she was killed," Auburn reminded him, putting a slight emphasis on the "we."

"Well, she had to be alive long after I left here, because she called Gerda to tell her she was going to be home that afternoon after all—something about grocery shopping."

They went to the kitchen to consult Gerda, who had a face like everybody's favorite grandmother and the shoulders of a line-backer. She readily confirmed that she'd received a brief phone call from Wanda Jansen late on Wednesday-morning, the day she died.

"She said there'd been a change of plans, and she wanted me to know she'd be home Wednesday evening. That's the day we usually do our grocery shopping, but I told her I couldn't make it because I'd already made other plans. She sounded . . . upset." Gerda cast a glance of mild reproach at Jansen, but it was evident that she didn't entertain the faintest suspicion that he had done Wanda in.

"And this was at what time on Wednesday?"

"A little after noon. She said she called twice. The first time I must not have heard her because it had started raining and I was bringing in some things I had airing out in my back yard."

Jansen waited till they were back in the entry hall to resume his defense, which he did with a certain amount of bravado. "I guess it's pretty obvious now that I couldn't have killed Wanda. Because long before it started raining, I had knocked off work at the cabin and settled down to some serious drinking."

"You may know that, sir, but my superiors and I don't. Did anyone see you at the cabin?"

"Not at the cabin, no. But I stopped at the grocery in Kerylhake to pick up a couple of bottles of wine. Lambert's Market. The wife waited on me, and I talked to the husband too as I was leaving. They'll remember when I was there, if you ask them soon enough."

Jansen's persistent and determined efforts to establish an alibi intensified Auburn's suspicions instead of allaying them. When the taxi arrived they sent it away, and Auburn drove Jansen to the cabin. First they stopped at Lambert's Market in the township of Kerylhake, where the proprietors both confirmed Jansen's statement that he had been in the store shortly after opening time at eleven A.M.

A graveled track led off County Road LL through the woods to the cabin, which was perched practically on the bank of the river. Jansen's van stood out in front.

"Am I off the hook now?" he wanted to know.

"Not really. The coroner's estimate of the time of death is just that—an estimate. It could be a couple of hours off one way or the other. And we don't know that you didn't go back later in the morning—"

"Listen, Officer," snarled Jansen, bristling with anger, "I drove in here at about a quarter after eleven on Wednesday, and I didn't budge until that deputy sheriff shook me out of a drunken stupor at six or seven that evening."

Auburn was silent.

"Am I under arrest?"

"No, sir."

The cabin proved to be more primitive than Auburn had expected, considering the size and appointments of the palace the Jansens occupied on Poplar Grove Drive. It consisted of a single room about twelve feet square. Not only was there no telephone, there was no gas or electricity either, and the only plumbing facilities were contained in a small building at the rear. A rustic fireplace served for both heating and cooking. A shutter had been fixed over one of the three windows. Two other shutters stood in a corner.

Jansen retrieved a few personal articles from a cupboard and locked the cabin. "Maybe I'll come back and put up the other shutters, and maybe I won't," he said. "Doesn't seem to matter much one way or the other now."

He unlocked the van and slid in behind the wheel. Auburn, who was just starting his own car, noticed that the van's windshield wipers began working as soon as Jansen turned on the ignition. His mouth got a little dry and his heart stumbled over the next few beats. He pulled his car forward quickly so as to block Jansen's exit from the driveway. He got back out of his car, stepped up beside the van, and motioned for Jansen to roll down the window.

"You just told me you got here a little after eleven o'clock Wednesday morning," he said, "and that you didn't leave until the sheriff's deputy picked you up that evening. But it looks like it must have been raining the last time you drove this van, and according to the Weather Bureau, the only rain we had in the county on Wednesday was from right before noon to right after two o'clock."

While Jansen was mulling over his reply, Auburn leaned forward and looked into the interior of the van. "What's in that box on the floor in front of the other seat?"

"It's empty," said Jansen quickly, and he picked it up and lifted the lid to prove it.

It was an insulated metal case, roughly cubical, with a crackle finish.

"How does it happen to be here in the van?"

"We use it to bring food up to the cabin."

"What kind of food?"

"Perishables. Meat, milk . . ."

"Perishables. Because you don't have a refrigerator here." Auburn took the case from Jansen and examined it more closely. "Even if this were half full of ice," he said, "it would all melt overnight. But dry ice would keep in an insulated box like this for two or three days. And since you're in pharmaceuticals, you probably have dry ice at your plant to ship drugs and vaccines."

Jansen was looking off in the distance and holding his breath like a condemned criminal in the gas chamber.

"Now I see why you made such a big deal about what time your wife died. If you packed dry ice around her body to make it look like she died a lot earlier than she did, that could explain the blister on her arm, couldn't it? Okay, Mr. Jansen, *now* you're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

In his confession, Jansen stated that he and Wanda had arrived together at the cabin on Wednesday around ten thirty A.M., as planned, to close it up for the winter. He dropped her off at the cabin to start cleaning and went to the grocery to get wine. When it was time to start fixing lunch, Wanda discovered that the insulated box contained only dry ice, the meat and other food items for their lunch at the cabin having been accidentally left at home.

She created such a scene that Jansen had to drive her home again. During the drive she tried twice to call Gerda from her cell phone, reaching her on the second try and advising her that she would be back from the cabin much earlier than expected. Arriving back home around noon, they discovered that in their absence the house had been burglarized and the dog killed.

That only aggravated Wanda's frenzy and added to the shrillness and bitterness of her haranguing. She'd been after him for years to install an alarm system. The catches on the downstairs windows were a joke. It was a foolish economy to save a few hundred by skimping on security for articles that had cost tens of thousands, et cetera, et cetera.

At length Jansen had heard enough. Standing next to his wife, holding the hatchet he'd found beside the dog's body in a handkerchief so as not to obscure any fingerprints left by Czar's killer, he suddenly realized how easy it would be to kill her and make it look as if she had fallen victim to the burglar.

Pure rage and resentment swung the hatchet; then cold reason

got into the act. If Jansen had gone straight back to the cabin and started in on the wine, he might have defied all the Auburns and Kestrels in the world to prove that he was involved in any way in his wife's death. But after striking the fatal blow he felt compelled to doctor the evidence.

He didn't know Cavendish had seen the van leaving the first time that morning, but he was sure he hadn't seen it returning and leaving again around noon, because Cavendish was never home at that time of day on Wednesday. The Lamberts hadn't seen Wanda when Jansen bought the wine, and had no particular reason to believe she was with him. And having overheard Wanda's half of her terse phone call to Gerda, he knew Gerda would assume that the call had come from home.

While packing dry ice around Wanda's body so that her temperature would fall rapidly and give the illusion that she had died much earlier, Jansen had rested the insulated case on the floor, where it had left a "fingerprint" of its crackle finish in a drip of blood.

He drove back to the cabin in a downpour of rain and started working on the first bottle of wine. He had planned to return home by late afternoon and pretend to discover the break-in, burglary, and murder, and remove any remaining residue of dry ice. But, whether out of remorse for his crime or from anxiety about being caught, he went through most of the wine and really did drink himself into a stupor.

Although Jansen admitted he'd killed Wanda "in a blind fury," he steadfastly denied having harmed the dog. Inevitably, Auburn's suspicions turned to Cavendish. Probably the neighbor had heard the dog outside bellowing "like a sheep having its throat cut," after he had seen, or thought he had seen, both Jansens driving away. On his way downtown he had very likely stopped in the Jansens' driveway, discovered the break-in, realized that it was the work of the man on the bike, and used the hatchet he found near the broken window to silence the dog forever.

But Auburn saw no point in pursuing the matter. He couldn't prove Cavendish's guilt, and anyway, there was no one to lodge a complaint: Wanda Jansen was dead and Dexter Jansen would be moving into a state-operated housing facility where the only pets permitted were birds and hamsters.

And, then again, dogs—all of them—were on Auburn's list of models needing to be recalled by the Manufacturer. 🐾

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Good morning, readers. Your mission, should you choose to accept it: Seek out the following mysteries, thrillers, and chillers when they come to your local cineplexes this summer.

As always, should you or any of your moviegoing team be angry that you shelled out ten bucks to see a flick that wasn't worth ten cents, the editors of AHMM will disavow any knowledge of this column.

This magazine will self-destruct in about fifty years (unless wrapped in plastic and stored in a cool, dry place).

Good luck . . .

Mission: Impossible III

Here's the impossible mission: getting this movie made. Originally given the green light sometime during the Clinton administration, *M: I III* has had a revolving door for both cast (Scarlett Johansson,



Carrie-Anne Moss, and Kenneth Branagh came and went before a single frame was shot) and crew (directors David "Se7en" Fincher and Joe "Narc" Carnahan parted due to scheduling conflicts and that old chestnut "creative differences"). *Alias* mastermind J. J. Abrams

finally got the job done, reuniting franchise linchpins Tom Cruise and Ving Rhames while adding Laurence Fishburne, *Felicity* star Keri Russell, and *Capote*'s Philip Seymour Hoffman to the mix. As always, expect lots of explosions—and almost as many outlandish plot twists. *May 5*

An American Haunting

In the great (or, depending on your viewpoint, perhaps not so great) tradition of *The Amityville Horror* and *The Exorcism of Emily*

Rose comes this supernatural thriller based on (supposedly) true events. From 1918 to 1920, a malevolent entity seemed to be stalking a family in rural Tennessee. Strange noises, otherworldly visions, and ghostly pranks eventually gave way (so the family claimed) to outright attacks—one of them deadly. Raising this hair-raiser above the standard horror shock-tactics is a surprisingly strong cast, including Oscar-winner Sissy Spacek and Emmy-winner Donald Sutherland. *May 5*

The Da Vinci Code

For the benefit of the seven people on the planet who haven't already read Dan Brown's mega-blockbuster bestseller comes this big-budget adaptation that's sure to ignite debate over the controversial question: What the heck is up with Tom Hanks's hair? The star tackles the role of globe-trotting academic Robert Langdon with his usual everyman charm—and what appears to be a Vitalis-soaked, Pat Riley-style 'do. The plot follows the pomade-slathered Langdon as he . . . oh, you know all that already, don't you? *May 19*



See No Evil

Given that this serial-killer horror flick is opening the same day as *The Da Vinci Code*, what most folks probably won't see is the movie itself. Still, there must be enough lovers of the teens-offed-one-by-one formula to fill a few seats. And the film is unique in one notable (if not especially enticing) way: It's probably the only movie being graced with a major theatrical release this summer that was directed by a man (the aptly pseudonymed Gregory Dark) with both a Britney Spears video and hardcore porn on his C.V. *May 19*

The Omen

They just couldn't resist. Someone at 20th Century Fox noticed that June 6, 2006, would be "6/6/6," and *voilà*—a remake was born. (Never mind that the sixth is a *Tuesday*. A marketing gimmick like this is too good to pass up.) As in the 1976 original, an American diplomat (Liev Schreiber, stepping in for Gregory Peck) begins to suspect that his son Damien is more than just a cute little devil. He might be The Devil, a k a The Antichrist. So who better to hire as the tyke's Satanic nanny than Mia Farrow, given that she



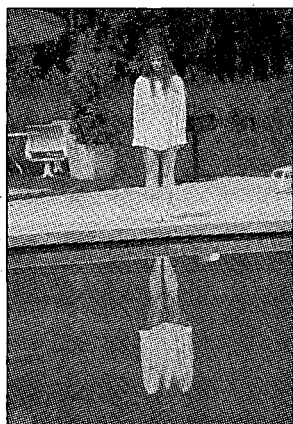
birthed Beelzebub's spawn nearly forty years ago in *Rosemary's Baby*? If the new *Omen* performs well this summer, it will no doubt have many unholy offspring of its own: sequels. *June 6*

A Scanner Darkly

Superman Returns and *X-Men 3* might look like the summer's big comic-book adaptations, but Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* does them one better: It's an adaptation that looks like a comic book. Using a technique called "inter-



polated rotoscoping" (basically the process of drawing over live-action footage), Linklater gives his movie the appearance of a graphic novel come to life. Based on a novel-novel (the non-graphic, just-words kind) by science fiction legend Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* tells the strange tale of an undercover cop (Keanu Reeves) who may or may not have a split personality: The powerful drug dealer he's trying to nail just might be . . . him. Whether the rotoscoped animation ends up being groundbreaking or merely irritating remains to be seen. Either way, though, it's bound to be interesting. *July 7*



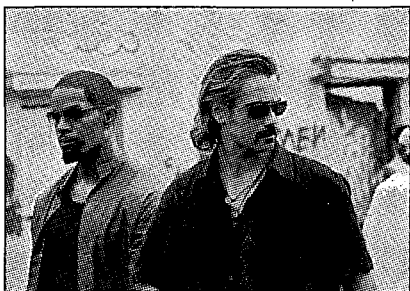
Lady in the Water

The lady is Bryce Dallas Howard, playing a sea nymph. The water is the swimming pool in a run-down apartment complex. But don't go expecting a *Splash* rip-off. The film is the seventh by twist-loving writer/director M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*, *The Village*), so there's little chance the nymph and the apartment super who discovers her (Paul Giamatti) will simply fall in love and have wacky misadventures. The waters in this pool are undoubtedly deep—and dark. *July 21*

Miami Vice

When Hollywood brings an old television favorite to the big screen, it sometimes feels like the creative team never even watched the

boob-tube classic it's supposed to be "reimagining." (Hence, *I Spy*.) No one could level that charge at the writer/director behind this big-budget franchise relaunch: He was around to help launch the franchise the first time. An A-list director now (with films like *Heat*, *The Insider*, *Ali*, and *Collateral* on his résumé), Michael Mann served as executive producer of the original series and is often credited with creating its distinctive "MTV Cops" style. Though Mann's back, series leads Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas have been replaced by Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx. Fortunately (at least to judge by the previews), Johnson's pastel T-shirt/white leisure suit wardrobe hasn't been dug out of mothballs either. *July 28*



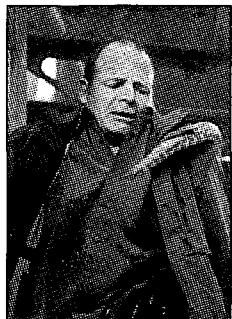
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The Reaping

At last, Hollywood tackles the taboo subject generations of moviemakers have found too hot too handle: the lewd, lurid corn harvests of the debauched American Midwest! Or not. Despite the 4-H-friendly title, *The Reaping* apparently has little to do with harvestry. Instead, it's an apocalyptic thriller in which a cynical disbeliever (Hilary Swank) begins to suspect that all the miracles she's been trying to debunk might actually be signs of the End Times. Given that director Stephen Hopkins's list of "credits" includes *A Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Child*, *Predator 2*, and *Lost in Space*, the real miracle would be if this flick's any good. But then again, maybe I'm just cynical . . . *August 11*

Snakes on a Plane

Well, there's nothing misleading about *that* name, is there? The only way it could be more descriptive would be with a subhead—*Snakes on a Plane: A Really Silly Thriller*, for instance. Samuel L. Jackson stars as Neville Flynn, a federal agent escorting a witness in protective custody on a flight from Los Angeles to Hawaii. En route, a dastardly assassin tries to get at the witness by filling the plane with . . . well, check out the title. If the film turns a profit, look for the sequel in next year's summer movie preview: *Bears on a Boat*. *August 18*



TEQUILA

JOHN C. BOLAND

The young woman in the black two-piece drank her first tequila before the boat had cleared the harbor. Behind her the shore was lined with gaily painted hotels, like stubby teeth at the mouth of a gray and wilted jungle. The girl was in her early twenties, with a slightly bent nose, short black hair, and a tan that had darkened in months of single-minded idleness. As the boat dipped, she perched on the rail outside a cabin where two men tended a linoleum-topped bar. When she tapped her heel on a window beside the bar, a fat brown man in a red bikini swimsuit slid open the glass pane.

"Tequila," she said.

"Why doan you drink Manhattans?"

"You don't serve Manhattans." She poked a dirty toe at his face.

He poured tequila into a double-shot glass, added warm cola, slammed the glass onto the bar. As it foamed, he handed the drink to the girl.

She chugged it.

"Another, Armando."

She had gone native, Joe thought; too lazy to move on, too stupid to hide the fact she was American. She had cut her hair, counting on nobody looking hard. Wouldn't have heard that Wally Macomb felt emasculated.

Her name was Judy Rainey. Joe hitched up on the rail near her. "What do they call those things?"

"Slammers," she said without looking at him. "Armando! Give it up, Armando! One tequila slammer for whatsisname."

"Joe."

"For Joe. Come on, *ande!*"

"*Sí, sí.*" The fat man handed out two drinks in quick succession and told a man beside him that the *gringa* would fall onto the boat propeller if God was just. To the girl, he called, "Doan drink too much tequila before you snorkel."

"I don't plan to snorkel."

"Is very beautiful on the reef."

Joe took a sip of tequila and grimaced. Knowing he looked sheepish, he grinned at Rainey and said, "I guess it's an acquired taste."

Joe had timed his approach well, but now Rainey's companion was coming back from the head, putting his feet down solidly, keeping a hand on the bar. The boy was big and lightly sunburned, with a low-riding tangle of blond hair and a bright island shirt that was so well pressed he had to be only a day or two off the plane. Last night Joe hadn't seen him at Rainey's hotel. This morning here he was, a complication. He looked up the companionway and, seeing Joe shoulder to shoulder with Rainey, didn't smile.

"Joe doesn't like slammers." Her brown eyes turned toward the man in the companionway. "Neither does Nick. Where am I going to find a guy who knows how to drink?"

"Who's this?" Nick asked as he mounted the steps. He was half a head taller than Joe, maybe six-three, broad shouldered, and thin like a basketball player. The corners of a blond mustache reached the edge of his jaw.

"Joe Scali." Joe raised his glass instead of offering a hand the blond man could refuse. "Do we snorkel before we get to the island or on the way back?"

"Both, but it's better on the way out," the girl said. "Light gets down to the reef early in the day. It isn't as good as the crew pretends. Lots of dead coral."

"Is there anywhere better?"

She nodded. "El Garrafon, over at Isla Mujeres, isn't bad."

"You sound like you've been down here a while."

She shot him a wary glance, but Joe looked harmless, so she grinned. A couple of her bottom teeth were crooked. She wasn't particularly pretty, just lean and feral. "Give me sun and tequila and I'm mellow," she said.

"Tell me about El Garrafon."

"They have parrot fish as big as Miguel."

Hearing his name, the smaller man below deck, dressed in a tank top and trunks, stopped sorting snorkel gear and watched the Americans.

The girl put her head close to the open window and shouted, "If you could find a fish as fat as Armando, it would be worth catching."

The fat man shouted back. "You cannot capture fish on the reef! It is a national treasure protected by our government."

"Don't worry, Armando, we won't catch a guppy."

"You must not pick coral," Armando insisted. "That is protected too."

"Is the beer protected?" Nick asked.

"The beer is not protected," Armando answered, putting a bottle into the waiting hand.

Joe was among the last of the dozen or so passengers to rent a salt-stained snorkel, mask, and flippers. He kept his T-shirt on because, although he was naturally dark, the sun was intense. The boat was turning on its anchor, and the shade cast by the canopy swung like an hour hand across the rear deck. The swell was gentle. A breeze had died.

"You're brave, young man," an elderly woman said. She was tented in white clothing, hat tied under her chin, her eyes hidden behind small, round sunglasses. "Mr. Havens and I saw a shark out here thirty years ago." She patted the knee of the small man beside her. His white cap engulfed the tops of his ears.

"Probably still out there," the man said. "Sharks live a long time."

The boat's captain, Luis, pulled open the door at the back of the deck and offered a hand to passengers stepping onto the swim platform. Joe waited until a couple of people were in the water. He scanned the hot flat surface for fins.

"The tide is toward the shore," Luis cautioned. "It is not strong, but it is steady. Can you see the coral? It is the dark area to starboard—this is starboard, *señores*. It is very sharp. This man knows. He wears a glove."

Nick held up his left hand. "For fending off," he said.

Joe entered the water after a dentist from Michigan who churned toward the reef with powerful kicks. Blinking water from his lashes, paddling back from the stern, Joe spat on both sides of the glass before pulling on the mask. As he blew into the snorkel mouthpiece, somebody jumped wide, landing near him, and the stiff edge of a fin grazed the back of his calf. The pain was sharp and unexpected. A bobbing head, half bald and dripping, was pointed away from him, oblivious to everything except its puffing need to stay afloat. As the fins lashed out again, Joe drew away. From the rail, a drink in her brown fist, Judy Rainey watched him wince and laughed.

Joe Scali put his face into the water and kicked off. He thought he might run into the young blond man Nick on the reef.

Isla Contoy broiled under the midday sun. Iguanas sprawled like frozen shadows around the tourist pavilion. Fat snakes rattled out of the brush and baked on the paths. Joe Scali sat at a wooden table in the airless heat, temples hammering, sweat creeping down his side, as Mrs. Havens reviewed the paucity of comforts.

She blamed the captain, who had shouldered an ice-filled chest of beer and soft drinks along the wooden pier and up to the pavilion, then had sent Miguel running back to the boat for tequila. Massive slabs of fish, hauled dripping from an insulated box, were roasted on the beach and served with rice and onions. Mrs. Havens doubted that the food was safe and pushed her plate away after Armando informed her they were eating barracuda.

The dentist from Michigan, whose name was Paulson, tried aloud to recall something about the safety of eating barracuda either above or below a certain latitude, but he couldn't remember details. He ate anyway. Joe drank dark beer that made his head throb. He rubbed a finger on his scraped calf. He hadn't been able to find Nick among the group inspecting the coral. The young man was sitting a few tables away with Judy Rainey.

"You seem lost in thought," Dr. Paulson said. He had a good smile, hair gone gray, liver spots on his cheeks.

"The heat's gotten to me. I can't think," Joe admitted.

"I thrive down here. Wouldn't expect it, coming from a cold climate. But my skin doesn't burn, and I don't sweat much." His eyes offered a shallow friendliness. "I should move my practice down here. But Phoebe wouldn't hear of it. Where are you from, and what sort of work do you do?"

It was the blunt inquisitiveness that vacationers permit themselves. "Upstate New York," Joe responded. "I work for a collection agency."

Paulson, who appeared to be in his early sixties, inclined his head. "There's a good-looking pair of blondes at the next table. Why isn't a young guy like you off collecting them instead of sitting with us geriatrics?"

"Blondes take upkeep," Joe said. He tried to sound confident. He didn't want to admit that he had no idea how to approach the two German girls, to whom he seemed to be invisible.

"Brunettes take upkeep too," Paulson said cheerfully. "And probably redheads, though I haven't married one of them."

Mrs. Havens, unhappy with the lunch, found her voice again. "Dr. Paulson's right, young man. It pays for people our age to be suspicious of young men who want to spend time with us. They may be trying to get their hands on an old person's estate, which in Mr. Havens's and my case is substantial."

Joe wondered if she understood the danger in such a declaration. Without smiling, he said, "Worth getting my hands on?"

The old woman drew back. Her husband, who sat with his elbows on the table watching nothing, turned his head slightly as Mrs. Havens's voice took on an edge.

"I don't think I like you," the woman told Joe. "You're not as nice as you present yourself as being."

Havens cleared his throat. "Honeybun . . ."

"Not at all nice. I can tell."

Havens sighed. He turned to Joe, apologetic but stern. "Would you sit somewhere else, young man? I don't like Mrs. Havens to be upset."

Joe said, "I'm sorry if I've troubled you."

"Just go somewhere else."

Paulson, the dentist, looked embarrassed. "Didn't mean to start something."

As Joe got up from the bench, stretching to make his indifference plain, Mrs. Havens's dry voice announced, "As soon as he mentioned a collection agency, we should have been warned. Gentle people don't trade off others' misfortunes."

Joe was a few yards away when Dr. Paulson rose and called, "Wait up, young fellow, I'll join you."

"This island is supposed to be a bird sanctuary," Dr. Paulson said, stopping on a path that led to higher ground behind the pavilion. "But I don't see much except pelicans and frigate birds."

Joe cupped his hands above his eyes. He wished he had worn a hat; every step higher brought him closer to the sun. The sandy path where his shadow squirmed threw back the heat and light, blinding him when he looked down. Startled lizards dashed for cover, shaking spiky fronds for a dozen yards after they were safely hidden.

"Perhaps if we slog a bit higher," Paulson suggested.

They reached a spiny crest that twisted along the back of the island. Fifty or sixty yards below, in a half ring of beach enclosed on the south by foam-covered rocks, Judy Rainey balanced on the rocks like a high-wire walker. She still wore the black bikini top but had added a flower-print wrap around her hips. Nick was a few feet behind her.

"Not a lady, I would say," the dentist remarked. "But this kind are more fun, aren't they? Wouldn't dare tell Phoebe that, of course."

Joe barely listened. Nick was very close to her now. It had been a mistake letting them get this far ahead of him. He wanted the blond young man to know someone was watching. So he put on a grin and called, "Hey down there!"

The girl turned, squinted at the bright sky, and waved. "Hey yourself!"

"Do you know what time the boat leaves?"

"Uh-uh." She climbed down from the rock, crossed the sand. "Nick and I are talking about sleeping over. Wouldn't that be

great? Just us and the beach."

The blond man came down to join her. His voice carried over the surf. "Yeah. Sand fleas and scorpions."

Joe was halfway down the slope now, and he heard her complain, "You're not as much fun as I thought."

Dr. Paulson, who had followed Joe, patted him on the shoulder. He spoke softly. "Could be you've got a chance with her yourself." That was all Joe needed, a chance.

"Nick's boring," she said. People had gathered near the pavilion, and the boat was tooting its horn. Rainey had sent Nick ahead with orders to get her a drink. Paulson had returned to the company of the Havenses. Joe and the girl were a hundred feet behind, the path plunging, the sun low enough that it was hitting them in the face, and he could feel his skin burning.

He said, "Wait a minute." As she turned, he tugged her onto a side path, gently, so she wouldn't scream.

"Hey!" He let go and she grinned, game for almost anything. "What's up?"

"Wally Macomb is looking for you," he said.

She backed away, and he raised a placating hand. "Don't worry, I don't work for him."

"I don't know any Wally."

Joe dug a plastic bag from his pocket, fingers clumsy because he had to open the watertight seal before he could reach his billfold. He let the case hang open. The gold and blue enamel badge, which he had worked for years to carry, was so new it didn't have a scratch. The girl didn't seem impressed.

"I'm a detective with the Stevensport Police Department," Joe said. "If you come back, you'll get immunity. And protection."

"Forget it." As her brown face tightened, she looked much older. "I'm going to Belize with Nick. You got no authority down here, so stay away from me." She started down toward the pavilion.

Joe said, "How do you know Nick isn't from Stevensport?"

She stopped. "He's from Chicago."

"Ask to see a driver's license or a passport. I found you. So could Wally's people."

Joe knew she wasn't coming back. She wasn't scared enough—or smart enough, depending on your perspective. He put away the badge. "Give yourself an even chance. Make sure who he is."

"Drop dead," she replied.

She headed past the pavilion toward the dock.

The boat left the wooden pier with a couple of final toots and a

blast of diesel smoke. Joe Scali tried to find a corner where he could sit alone, but the fat man whose fin had scraped him settled onto a nearby bench and talked about ruins. He had a bright fresh sunburn. His skin was moist, his hands small. He was about Joe's age, early thirties. He was excited about snorkeling, and after talking about ruins, he mentioned a lagoon farther down the coast where there were supposed to be unusual fish.

Leaning against the rail, an arm around Nick's waist, Judy Rainey lifted a bare foot and kicked the side window. She had a glass in hand. "Armando, *más* tequila!"

The companionway was open, and Joe heard the crack of the glass being slammed onto the bar. It sounded like a gunshot. By the time the hotels broke the horizon forty minutes later, the girl's brown legs were rubbery. Nick eyed her dark skin with a look that was at least half distaste.

A number of people from the boat were staying at the same hotel. The Havenses sat at a tiny round table in the hotel garden and complained about the towels in their suite. Dr. Paulson and the fat man argued Mexican politics. Two middle-aged women sat together and plotted over a map. The German girls had gone wherever there were better prospects—still without noticing Joe. He had blown it with Rainey because of his basic incompetence around women. The Chief of Detectives could have tapped two or three guys from the squad who had a knack for getting young women to buy into them. When Joe tried picking up women at the Front Street bars, the nice ones told him he was too needy.

He spent the late afternoon on the telephone with his boss in Stevensport, trying to put a name to the tall, blond young man who called himself Nick. The detectives chief, Larry Zwick, didn't recall Wally Macomb having any tall blond enforcers. "He could have farmed the job out to Pittsburgh," Zwick said. "I'll call over there. You gotta convince her it's in her interest to come back."

"She knows better. She's drinking tequila and baking in the sun."

"Did you crowd the blond guy?"

"A little. He knows I'm interested. And she's probably told him I'm a cop."

"That might keep her alive awhile."

"Maybe the guy's okay."

"I'll call you with whatever Pittsburgh's got."

Joe went downstairs in the early evening and ate alone. Dr. Paulson and the fat man, whose name was Jimmy something, tried to talk him into joining them cruising the discos along Playa Linda. Joe declined. He felt like enough of a loser without touring hot

spots with a sixty-year-old dentist and a fat bald guy named Jimmy.

Judy Rainey and Nick didn't come down for dinner.

He was in his room, almost asleep, listening to a three-piece band in the park across the street, when Larry Zwick called back. "Pittsburgh's killers are all short and swarthy, just like Stevensport's," he said. "Maybe Wally hasn't found her. If she won't budge tomorrow, we'll see if the Mexican cops will pick her up."

Joe was sitting in the tiny lobby the next morning when Judy Rainey headed out. She wore a flower-print shift that looked unwashed, as did the girl. He fell into step beside her. "Where's Nicky boy?"

She ignored him for a minute, then said, "He decided he doesn't like girls who throw up on him during—you know."

He thought it was an amazingly delicate expression, *you know*, coming from someone who had been kept by Wally Macomb before she was seventeen.

"You threw up on him?" He looked at the pavement, trying to hide his smile.

"It was either that or the fact I got a cop hanging on me. Either way, he's headed for Belize solo." She stopped, squinting, her whole small face pinched. She was sweating, and her odor was sour. She rubbed her forehead as if she could wipe away a hang-over. "How long you gonna pester me?"

"Not long. There are other ways to get Wally."

"Good, go get him. I'm never going back. Wally had a guy named Iggy try to cut me. If a friend hadn't tipped me, I'd be at the bottom of the river. Wally sucks. So's the town."

"It's not that bad."

"He pays a couple of cops, you know. Maybe you're one of them."

For some reason, he felt no surprise. "You have names?"

"I need a drink. Over there."

There was a thatched-roof, open-air place a few steps off the avenue that was open for business. Joe ordered Bloody Marys. The girl slumped on the stool and kept rubbing her face. Her eyes were out of focus. If she kept knocking back the booze, Wally wouldn't have to send someone.

"You know a vice cop named Starkey?" She spoke past the heel of her hand. "And a woman detective named Brubaker? Those are the ones I know about."

The first name confirmed a lot of what Joe Scali knew about his hometown. The second name hit him like a knife in the ribs. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I saw Iggy give 'em both their monthly allowances."

You don't look so good. The liquor hits you, don't it?"

"I'm not much of a drinker," Joe admitted.

"How long you been a detective?"

"A while."

"Like a week?"

"Almost three months."

"Jeez, they send a newbie. You know Starkey? He's about your age."

"I know him."

"A pig even among pigs, right? And Brubaker? I saw the way you looked."

"She's a sergeant."

Judy Rainey squinted at him, then laughed. "You ought to see your face. You got something going with her?"

Joe Scali put down his glass. "She's my boss's girlfriend."

"So you're out of luck."

"Maybe we both are," Joe said. "My boss knows where I am."

The booze had slowed her down. It took several seconds before her face scrunched up and she snarled, "You idiot!" Then she was off the stool and running before he could stop her.

Nick hadn't left the hotel. Passing through the lobby, Joe saw him drinking at a tiny two-seat bar next to the reception desk. In his room, Joe sat on the unmade bed and debated calling Larry Zwick. As far as he could figure, there was no percentage in telling Zwick that one of his detectives, in particular one he was sleeping with, was on Wally Macomb's pad. If Chief Zwick didn't know, Joe's second-hand word might not convince him. If he did know . . .

If Zwick knew, then by now Wally Macomb might know where Rainey was. Or he might not. The chief could want the girl as leverage. You never knew exactly who owned whom in Stevensport.

Joe stared at his suitcase, folded open on the luggage rack. Traveling to Mexico, he hadn't been able to bring a gun.

He went downstairs, joined Nick at the bar. "I saw Judy this morning. She says you're off to Belize."

The blond man nodded, not too friendly. "You really a cop? She wouldn't tell me what she'd done. Said you're both from some butt-ugly place in Pennsylvania."

"I thought you might be from the same place," Joe said.

He shook his head. "Chicago. So what'd she do? Kill someone?"

"It doesn't matter." Joe tried to figure the guy. Zwick said he wasn't local talent, but Joe couldn't trust Zwick. He had only his own judgment, and he didn't have much time. "What do you think of her?"

"Drunk. Not great in the sack. Nice tan. Okay body." He thought

about it, beer bottle to his lip, couldn't come up with more. He didn't care.

"Like her enough to take her to Belize?"

"Not really."

"For five hundred bucks?"

"What else do I have to do?"

"Keep quiet." He thought about saying, Watch for the next guy they send. If he didn't bring her back, there would be someone else, no doubt about it. Joe couldn't do anything about that. If she kept drinking, she might not last long enough for Wally to deal with her. All Joe could take care of was a week, maybe two, maybe a month. "Keep quiet," Joe said, "and leave today. Five hundred."

"What's it about?"

"She needs to be out of sight for a while."

The young man started to ask something more, then stopped. He looked a little more sympathetic than he had. "There's some places in Belize not many outsiders get to."

"Don't tell me," Joe said. If it came down to it, he was afraid he would give her up. She wasn't worth his career, never mind his life. He had to get along with Zwick and Brubaker. He might have to learn to get along with Wally Maccomb.

"Five hundred?" Nick said.

Joe counted the money onto the bar. Paying for her chance to get away with the city's money, he told himself he was doing the right thing.

"So the young lady left," the dentist from Michigan said. There were three of them at the dinner table. Joe had relented on touring the night spots when Dr. Paulson said it would be good, after a night of carousing, if he had two young men to prop him up. The fat man named Jimmy had found a seafood restaurant attached to a large open-air discothèque that overlooked the bay. He wore a sleeveless shirt that exposed solid pink arms. After consuming two margaritas before his food, he sat glassy eyed as young dancers spun like brown tops above the tide.

"The young lady you had your eye on," Dr. Paulson elaborated, speaking to Joe. "She left."

"Really?" Joe met the older man's gaze. The dentist may have been amused.

"There are still the blondes," Paulson said. He raised his fork, then lowered it. "The young fellow she's taken up with asked me to tell you something. He said he might run into you in Stevensport. Does that mean anything?"

REDEMPTION COVE

BRENDAN DUBOIS

On this weekend in August at Lake Benjamin, my younger brother Stan unrolled a chart on the wooden table in the front porch of our family cottage. His thick finger traced the outline of one of the scores of coves on the lake, as he said, "Here. This is where her body is. I'm sure of it."

I nodded politely as Stan fastened one end of the chart down with an almost-empty bottle of Sam Adams beer and anchored the other end with a glass tumbler from the Polar Ice Caves, one of the many tourist attractions in this part of New Hampshire.

"Why's that?" I asked. "No offense, Stan, but it's been what . . . fifteen years? What makes you think this is the right cove?"

He sat down on one of the ill-painted wicker chairs that cluttered the porch. "Because of the water levels, that's what."

"Sorry," I said. "I don't understand."

Stan leaned over the table and again traced the outline of the cove, so small it didn't even have a name. "When I found her in the water, it was about this time of year. We'd had almost two weeks of rainy weather, and the water level of the lake was higher than it'd been in a long, long time. That's how I was able to get my canoe in there. Because the water level was so high. And that's why, when you and Dad and Uncle Tom and me went out later, we couldn't find that cove again. We had a spell of dry weather and the dam at the other end was opened up, dropping the water level. The cove was hidden by some boulders. I'm sure of it."

"Oh," I said, hoping Stan wasn't detecting the tone of my voice, a tone that was used whenever Stan got into one of his moods. He looked up at me, his brown eyes tired, like he had not gotten a good night's sleep in all the intervening years, when as a boy not even yet a teenager, he had come back late one afternoon to this cottage, just as we were getting ready to go home, eagerly shouting that he had found a girl's body in a cove.

I felt a little tingle of shame, remembering how we had laughed



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and mocked him when he had come back with such a fantastic story. Poor Stan. Back about fifteen years ago, maybe if he had attended school in a better-funded district, something could have been done for him, some sort of special schooling or counseling. Stan had always been one for bursts of manic energy and beliefs. Like the time he had read a story about pirates along the New England seacoast, and during a week's family vacation at Hampton Beach, he had gone out every day with a shovel, digging for buried treasure. His hands blistered, his skin peeled from sunburn, and his toes bled from the rough sand and rock, but he would not give up.

And there was the time he decided to build a hovercraft in which to travel to school so he wouldn't be teased on the school bus. He had taken apart mother's vacuum cleaner to do so, and could not understand why Mom had been so upset.

That was Stan. So when he announced fifteen years ago that he had found a young girl's body, not only dumped in the cove, but chained to concrete blocks so that it would not float to the surface, well, he was teased and teased by me and our cousins, until he sat in the corner, crying. Dad had to drag him into the car so we could beat the traffic on the way home.

And my, he put up such a fuss that when we returned to our summer cottage the next weekend, me and Dad and Uncle Tom and Stan went out in our old power boat looking for that cove. But poor, young, flustered Stan could not remember which cove the supposed body had been in. And all that summer, and the summer after that, and the summer after that—and it still shames me to think about it—there would be whispered jokes about Stan and the mysterious body.

Now Stan looked across the table at me, the younger brother looking up at the older brother, and said cautiously, "The weather's supposed to be nice tomorrow, Eric. The lake level is really, really high. And when the weekend is over—I read this in the local paper—they're gonna drop the lake level. Maybe we can take the pontoon boat out there. Find that cove. Do some snorkeling. What do you think?"

I knew what I thought. I thought that we should just enjoy the weekend, maybe motor into one of the bigger coves and anchor and have a barbecue and sun ourselves, and play cribbage and use the binoculars to spy on loons and ospreys or bathing beauties sunning themselves on passing speedboats. Do anything but what he wanted to do.

But there was his hand again, resting on the unfurled chart. A rough hand, one used to tough work, and along the back of it, an

odd spider web tattoo, the type of tattoo that one could only get inside a state prison. I thought of my younger brother and who he was and what he had gone through, and . . .

"Of course. After breakfast, we'll pack a lunch and head right out, when the water's nice and calm. We'll spend all day there, if you'd like."

He smiled, revealing bad teeth. Not much in the way of professional dentistry is offered in our state prison system. "Thanks, Eric . . . I mean it . . . thanks. That means a lot to me."

"Good," I said. "What do you say we grab another beer before turning in?"

He carefully rolled the chart up. "Okay. But I'll do the dishes first. Deal?"

"Deal."

While Stan washed the dishes in the small kitchen while listening to a Red Sox game on the radio, I went out to the entranceway and made a phone call home. The cottage phone was an actual rotary dial. Last year when my twin boys saw the phone, eyes agape at seeing such an antique, they couldn't believe it actually worked. It was like I had traded in our Honda SUV for a hundred-year-old Stanley Steamer.

I dialed seven digits and my wife Marie picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Hi there," I said.

"Hi right back," she said. "How are you two doing?"

"Fine," I said. "We're doing fine."

"Uh-huh," she said, her voice a bit skeptical. "Your brother-to-brother bonding project going all right?"

I turned, made sure Stan was busy enough so that he couldn't hear me. "I haven't seen him this relaxed in years. Really. This place has a nice effect on him. It really does."

"Sure," she said. "You two off on that body hunt tomorrow?"

"As a matter of fact, we are."

"Well, I guess that's better than robbing a gas station. Or a liquor store."

I took a breath. "He's been doing well since his release. His parole officer said he's one of the best he's ever dealt with. He's got an apartment, a job lined up. He's paid his debt. He's just . . . he's just lost, that's all."

Marie said, "And it's your job to get him un-lost?"

"That's what brothers are for. I owe him."

She sighed. "Okay, okay . . . Look, you coming back Sunday night?"

"Yeah," I said. "How are Don and Hank doing?"

"Your sons are fine, doing a sleepover at the Harrisons, off to a baseball game in Manchester tomorrow."

"Good."

"Oh, and your page proofs arrived today."

"Did you open them?"

"Of course," she said.

"When are they due back?"

"Five days."

I muttered something that would have made my twin boys giggle, and Marie said, "What I can't understand is how they expect you to take almost two years to write a novel, then spend less than a week to make sure all the edits are in place before they get ready to publish."

"If I ever understand that, I'll let you know. Anything else?"

"Yes," she said. "Another application came for your research and office assistant job. Eric, you sure you still want to do this?"

I said, "Hon, the first few novels, you went above and beyond helping me with research and fending off all those book clubs who wanted me to come speak to them in Michigan in exchange for a casserole dinner and a night on a pull-out couch. Now it's time to hire somebody else to do that grunt work, so you can take a break."

She laughed. "Okay, so you've twisted my arm. Or just gave it a slight tug. I have to admit I'm not going to miss rummaging through used book stores or the wilds of the Internet to dig up that odd bit of information about first century Roman marriage rites."

I said, my voice light, "There's no such thing as an obscure piece of information. All information is relevant. Some is just better hidden than others."

"Sure, Mister Author, whatever you say. You call me before you head home, all right?"

"Of course."

Later, Stan and I were out on the porch, another bottle of Sam Adams in our hands, and we listened to the Red Sox battle the Toronto Blue Jays. We both were in the old wicker furniture, feet propped up on the window sills, looking out over the dark waters of Lake Benjamin. When we had settled down, I was surprised to see Stan had a copy of my latest novel in his lap, *Coliseum*.

Stan looked over at me shyly. "I like this one the best, Eric. I really do."

I raised my Sam Adams in a toast to my novel, my lucky, lucky novel. "So do you and a bunch of others. I'm glad to hear that."

He rubbed the cover, touching my name, almost like it was a talisman. He said, his voice now tinged with just the slightest bit of anger, "Mom . . . Mom would always send me newspaper clippings about you. When your first novel got published. And your second and third . . . And when the fourth one really took off for you . . . I knew she was really, really proud of you, Eric. But damn it, I think she was rubbing it in, you know? Showing me just how lousy I was. One perfect son was on the bestseller list, the other loser son a convict . . ."

I said carefully, "She was just showing off. That's all. That's Mom."

His eyes seemed to glisten in the dim light. "Yeah. I'm sure. And I'm sure she didn't pass along those little newspaper stories about my arrests and convictions, right?"

"Right."

Then he shook his head, like he was snapping out of it. "I read all your books in prison. Told guys I trusted, you know, guys who wouldn't give me a hard time, told them that you were my brother. Some didn't believe it, even when you dedicated the third book to me. I know I said it before, but I really, really appreciated that, Eric."

"I was glad to do it."

He looked down at the cover and said, "I still know all the titles. *The Seven Hills. Appian Way. The Forum. Coliseum.* What's the next one going to be called?"

"Beats the hell out of me," I said. "You have a name I could use?"

He laughed. "That's a good one. That really is. Eric . . . After I read all of your books, I even started reading up on Roman history from books in the prison library. You made me think. I'm really, really proud of you, and . . . jealous. Okay? Just a bit jealous. You always knew what you wanted to do. Always knew you wanted to be a writer. Even up here in the cottage you read all those books and wrote stories on Uncle Tom's old typewriter. And still found time for the girls. And me? A loser. Even then."

"Not so," I said.

He shook his head. "Don't bother trying to make me feel good. It won't work. You know what I think? I think finding that body ruined it all."

"How's that?"

"Because nobody believed me. Nobody. And I couldn't find the cove again, or the dead girl. Everybody thought I was making it up. If I had found her . . . well, I'd be a hero. Sort of. And I'd get my name and picture in the paper. And people would believe me, and would think I was okay . . . but instead, it was just another

crazy story from Stan. Stan who couldn't finish school, couldn't find a good job, who ended up doing bad things."

"That was a long time ago, little brother," I said, balancing my beer on the end of the armrest on my chair. "Not good to let something so long ago rule you."

"Yeah, I know. Damn, I'm talking too much. Let's see if the Sox can pull this one out and hit the sack, okay?"

"Sure."

So we sat and finished our beers, and like so many times before, the Sox didn't pull this one out, and so we went to bed.

Stan got the bedroom that Mom and Dad used—our parents were now gently slumbering away their retirement in Florida, since Dad got fed up with the snow and ice each winter—and I took one of the two smaller bedrooms. But the air was warm and still and dead, and I couldn't fall asleep. Instead, I went out to the porch and stretched out on the couch, a light blanket over me, listening. There was a desperate *hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo* from an owl deep in the woods, the sound of frogs out in the shallow water in front of the cottage, and the far-off cries of loons out on the lake, cries that still made the back of my arms tingle, just like when I was a young boy, hearing them for the first time.

I rolled over on the musty-smelling couch, the old smell triggering scores of memories. Being here with Mom and Dad and Uncle Tom and other cousins and aunts and uncles, crowding around inside as a rainstorm roared outside. The quiet hiss of camp lanterns making light around the wide kitchen table as we played card games. Or long nights playing Monopoly or Scrabble, the young'uns against the oldsters. Big, brawling, drinking Uncle Tom, who worked in the woods as a lumberjack, joking with my dad, his brother, a slight man who worked his entire life as an accountant. Uncle Tom teaching me and Stan how to fish, how to build a fire, how to shoot a .22 rifle, and one memorable and secret night, how to drink our first beer. And of course, as Stan had mentioned, me before Uncle Tom's old manual typewriter, writing my very first stories, feeling that burning power and energy, knowing what I was destined to do when I got older.

Oh, the memories . . . and that memory, of course, of Stan bursting in through the porch, late in the afternoon, breathing hard, almost screaming in the excitement that he had found a girl's body, that we had to go right now, right now, to check it out . . . and how he was laughed at and ignored, up to the point when Dad had to pick him up and carry him out to the packed car for the drive south.

I thought about those times and was just beginning to drift off, when I heard something else.

Moaning.

Then a sharp yelp.

"Stan?" I called out.

I got off the couch and padded into the kitchen of the cottage to the open door that led into the main bedroom. Stan was there, on his side, breathing heavy. I could make out bits of words and sentences as he trembled in his sleep.

"No . . . don't do it . . . I promise . . . please . . . it hurts too much . . . don't force it . . . please . . . oh God . . . please make it quick . . . it hurts . . . God . . ."

My legs were shaking. I did not want to know what he was dreaming about, did not want to know what memories he was reliving, I just didn't want to know. Stan had never said much of anything about his prison time. I knew I should go over and wake him up, to rouse him from his nightmare, but I couldn't do it. I didn't want to shame him by waking him up.

I turned and went back out to the porch, back to the couch, and when the blanket came back up on me, Stan's nightmares seemed to have ended.

At least for a while.

I stared up at the bare rafters of the porch and waited. Just waited, to see if he would dream any more this night.

In the morning I was up first, and I let Stan sleep. God bless Stan. Just before going to bed, he had vowed that he would get up with the sunrise and that we would make an early start of it out on the lake, but he was snoring in the big bed and I let him be. I made us sandwiches for later and packed them in a cooler, and made a pot of coffee and had a cup, sitting out on the porch, watching the mist rise up from the flat waters, seeing a lone trout fisherman drift by on his boat, one of those specialty craft that cost more than my first car.

On the chair next to me was *Coliseum*. I picked it up and still felt that little shock of amazement that it had all really happened. Once out of college I had become a newspaperman at the state's largest newspaper and had married Marie, a copy editor, and in spare moments here and there, I had written two mystery novels that had gotten me an agent and nothing else. Then my third book, which took place more than two thousand years ago, would tell the story of a prominent Roman family through a few centuries of Roman history.

The Seven Hills was my first published novel. It did okay. Later

came *Appian Way* and then *The Forum*. For my fourth book, I took a risk, a different tack. I had decided to tell the story of early Christianity in Rome and had written about some controversial aspects of the first Christians, and much to my surprise, and that of my agent, editor, and publishing house, *Coliseum* had taken off like a rocket ship with a nuclear bomb up its ass. It was now in its twentieth printing. Last year I had quit my newspaper job, and at the going-away party held for me by my fellow editors and reporters, I could tell that every one of them was happy for me—and that every one of them hated me.

I put the book down.

Stan came in, yawning, scratching at his belly, his prison tattoos prominent on his hands and arms.

"Man, I'm sorry I overslept."

"Not a problem, Stan. Not a problem."

"Thanks." He grinned. "Feel like making breakfast for me?"

I smiled back at him. "Absolutely."

An hour later we made the short walk down a stone path to the dock, where the family's pontoon boat was docked. Stan carried snorkeling gear and towels, while I carried the cooler and some bags of snacks. I looked off to the right, where a cottage squatted, collapsed and decaying, windows broken, center roof beam sagging in. The old Mulligan place. God, when I was a teenager, it was even called the old Mulligan place back then. Stan saw me looking at it and said, "Place still gives me the creeps."

I almost shivered. "Me too. Think anyone will buy it, spruce it up?"

"Last I heard, relatives are still fighting over who gets what in old man Mulligan's will. Fight's been going on for twenty years. But when I talked to Mom last week, she said that the fight might be over. Hell, the Nature Conservancy might buy the land, finally tear that dump down."

"Really? The Nature Conservancy?"

Stan made a face. "Yeah, but it don't matter. The place still gives me the creeps. Remember rule one from Mom and Dad?"

"Sure," I said. "Stay away from the old Mulligan place. Don't go near there."

Stan grinned. "Hey, maybe later, we can go over . . . just to say we did it."

We both laughed and I followed him to the dock.

The pontoon boat was twenty-feet long and ten feet wide, with

cushioned seats on both sides, a carpeted deck, and a small round table aft for lunches or games of cribbage. Yesterday, Stan had taken the boat's cover off, a job that normally takes twenty minutes but had taken poor thumb-fingered Stan nearly an hour. Despite my old urge to lend him a hand, I let him be. We stowed the cooler and gear under the seats and Stan went back to the dock and undid the bow line and stern line.

From the pilot's chair on the right—or starboard—I made sure the engine was in neutral, then I started her up. It took one twist of the key and the engine grumbled to life. Stan gently pushed the boat away from the dock, then leapt through the open side door. As I maneuvered our way out the channel to the main lake, he bustled around, stowing the bow and stern lines, and hauling in the three fenders that prevented the boat from getting damaged by hitting the dock. There was a throttle handle next to me that had three settings—forward, reverse, and neutral—and a switch at the side that lowered the engine up and down, very important when motoring through shallow waters, especially in keeping your propeller intact.

Stan sat across from me, breathing hard. "A beautiful day, brother. A beautiful day."

"It sure is," I said. It was warm without being oppressively hot, and there was no breeze, so the lake water was as smooth as glass. It was still early enough in the day that the lake wasn't too crowded, though there were people out and about in the cottages that were on either side of the wide channel. I looked around, happy at the view. The distant peaks of the White Mountains, the still heavily forested shorelines of the lake, and the flat and clear water around us almost made me forget what we were trying to do today: find the remains of a young girl, supposedly murdered and drowned almost fifteen years ago.

The engine was running smoothly and slowly enough that Stan and I could talk without having to raise our voices. He grinned and said, "When I was in prison in Concord, this was what I missed most. Being outside. Feeling the air on my face. Being able to look for miles and miles and miles and not see a fence line or guard tower, or all that damn concrete. Brother, I can't tell you how much I'm enjoying this. God, I missed this. I really did."

The channel made a sharp turn to the right and I gently moved the polished wood steering wheel, and off to the left—or port, if you're being picky—was a cottage, larger than ours, and moored off their shoreline was a raft. Three young ladies—late teens or early twenties, it looked like—were sunning themselves as we motored by. Stan gave them a friendly look, and so did I, and

though I would never admit it aloud, I was glad to see that the thong bathing suit revolution had finally established a beachhead at this remote New Hampshire lake. The young ladies gave us friendly waves, their tanned bodies already glistening with sun block, the tiny scraps of fabric from their suits barely holding in their young flesh.

Stan looked over at me. "Okay. There was something else I missed too. I'll admit that."

Once we were out of the channel, I increased the boat's speed. Based on the chart, I knew we'd get there in just a while, and once we got there . . . well, it was out of my hands. I would do the best I could for my brother and leave it at that.

After about twenty or so minutes of motoring, I slowed the boat down to just above a crawl. I was glad for the lack of breeze, for we were moving so slowly that any errant wind could catch us and make us head off in another direction. We were in a narrow section of the lake called, for understandable reasons, The Narrows, because it had a number of small tree-covered islands and coves along the curving shore.

Stan was standing next to me, looking at the chart. He said, "You know, I could never understand why Uncle Tom never found out about this cove. Hell, he spent more time up here than anybody else. Practically lived here on weekends."

"Maybe he had other things to do," I said. "Like getting another six-pack in case he ran out."

Stan shook his head, looked at the chart, and said, "Okay, round this point, Eric, and I'm sure it'll be there. Positive."

"All right," I said, though I admit I was getting nervous. The pontoon boat was a wonderful craft for motoring out on the lake and anchoring at a place where you could swim and have lunch and read books and relax. But it was an ungainly, awkward craft, and I didn't feel comfortable maneuvering about these islands and narrow waters. If I had been tougher or smarter, I wouldn't have gone this far, but the eagerness on Stan's face . . . it was like that of a ten-year-old Red Sox fan finally being told that yes, this weekend, he would get to go to Fenway Park for the first time.

We rounded the point, and Stan suddenly said, "There! See? I was right! The cove is right there!"

I put the engine in neutral, looked at where Stan was pointing. There was a cove there. I leaned over some and saw that the entrance was about twice as wide as the boat and curved off sharply to the right. The water level was high and I could make out boulders underneath the water. Any other time, with the

water level at its normal height, the boulders would be exposed, blocking access and even the view of what might be in there. So Stan had been right.

Stan looked at me and I looked at him, and my hands were tight around the steering wheel.

"Okay," I said. "We found it. Now what?"

"What? What do you mean, *now what*? We go in there, Eric! We go in there and look for her!"

I nodded and said, "All well and good, Stan, but the water's pretty shallow. I don't know if we'll get over those boulders."

"Hold on," he said. He opened up one of the forward seats and pulled out a grappling pole that was used to grab wayward life jackets and hats sent overboard by the wind. He went to the front of the pontoon boat, leaned over, stuck the pole down, and then brought it up. "There's at least a couple of feet clearance," he said. "We should make it okay."

The engine was still in neutral, grumbling patiently for me. I looked at the tall and quiet trees, the water, and the almost hidden boulders, thinking about how many boulders out on the lake I had seen with paint scrapings from errant boaters who didn't know how to read a chart and had torn out the bottom of their high-priced boats in a matter of seconds.

"Stan," I said. "Maybe so, but we've got a couple of hundred pounds of engine dragging us down by the stern. And you know what these pontoons are like. They're hollow pieces of aluminum, like a big-ass beer can. We hit one of those rocks hard enough and we're sunk. Literally."

"Yeah?" he said, his face red. "You want to give up, do you?"

The look on his face was a familiar one, the one that came up when Stan felt angry, felt like nobody was listening to him, that the entire universe existed just to thwart him. I'm no psychologist or psychiatrist or mental health worker, just an older brother, but I knew this was what had gotten him into trouble so many times. When he had no job and no money, well, it made sense to hook up with others, others who would be with him as he robbed gas stations and liquor stores and broke into homes so he could have money. It had been that direct. He needed money and other people had it; what was the problem?

Oh, God, the problems . . .

"No," I said. "I don't want to give up. Look, we can go back to the cottage, get one of the canoes out of storage, paddle back here and—"

"Damn it, Eric," he said, his face even more red. "That'll take

hours. Hours! I don't want to waste any more time. I want to get in there right now."

I looked again at that face, saw the years of anger and disappointment colored in there, and I slowly nodded. "Okay. We'll go in."

In a snap, his face changed, he was grinning, he looked years younger, and he started talking until I interrupted him. "Hold it. Just hold it. It's going to be tricky, okay? I want you forward with the pole, to balance some of the weight and to fend us off if we're going to hit anything. I'm going to back her up some and give her a quick goose forward. Once we start moving, I'm going to raise the engine. If we're lucky, we'll coast right over those boulders."

"Yeah, that should do it," he said. "Man, you are the smart one."

I shook my head. "Not hardly. You got it? Go forward with the pole and we'll give it a shot. And Stan . . ."

"Yeah?" He still had the pole in his hands.

"We sink the boat, you're the one calling Dad."

Stan looked fine with that. "That's okay. He'd expect it anyways from me."

So that's what we did, and by then, even though it wasn't hot at all, I was sweating so much that my polo shirt was sticking to me. I thanked all gods, past and future, that there was still no breeze, no blowing wind to drag us off track, and I lowered the throttle at my side, reversing us a dozen feet or so. Then I went into neutral as the engine shuddered some, and I aimed the square bow at the middle of the cove and gave the throttle a quick, heavy boost up, traveling us forward in a burst of speed. After that burst of speed, I slammed the throttle back down to neutral and toggled the side switch to raise up the engine. Behind me the electric motor whined harshly as the engine raised up, and Stan cheered "Yoo-hoo!" as we passed over the submerged boulders.

God, maybe we're going to make it and—

I winced as the left pontoon rubbed up against a boulder and the screeching noise seemed to cut right through my head. I half-expected a sharp jolt as we ground to a halt, but I'd be damned, the screeching noise stopped and we were in a small cove. I lowered the engine to give us power and maneuverability and gave the throttle a gentle push forward. Stan looked back at me, triumphant.

I was still too nervous to say anything and quickly took in our new surroundings. The cove jogged right and was mostly hidden from view from the lake. It was wide in the center, but it was still plenty small. I yelled out, "Stan! The anchor! Right now!"

Stan trotted past me to the stern, where the anchor and its coiled rope rested, and he tossed it over the side with a heavy splash. I put the engine back into neutral, and Stan tugged at the rope and said, "It's good. We're good."

"Glad to hear that," I said, and I cut the engine off as Stan leaned over and tied off the excess anchor rope to a stern cleat.

It was now quiet. I looked around us some more and was startled when Stan hugged me from behind, his exuberant voice in my ear. "Oh God, it's just like I remembered! Eric, this is the place. Look over there at that big boulder, split down the middle. Do you see it?"

It was hard to miss. At the far end of the cove, a large boulder squatted there, right at the water's edge, with a huge crack down the center, like some bolt of lightning or otherworldly force had split it in two.

"Yeah, I see it." I was cold at the realization that Stan had remembered this, had even mentioned this boulder during those fruitless weeks, years ago, looking for the lost cove.

"I remember that! I remember canoeing over and trying to put my hand in it . . . and it was just a few minutes later that I saw her, in the water, right over there . . . God, let's get going!"

From a small digital clock on the console before me, I saw that it was getting close to lunchtime, but I knew getting Stan to relax and have a meal before going into the water wasn't going to work, not by a long shot, and so I said, "Okay, let's go."

As we got ready I took in the small cove. The split boulder was a prominent fixture. Along the sides of the cove were heavy brush and saplings. Water bugs skittered on the flat surface of the water. I was feeling colder and colder at the thought of diving and finding . . . well, whatever we were going to find.

As he put on his black flippers, Stan said, "You're the smart one, you tell me this. What are we going to see down there?"

I joined him on the long seat, putting on my own flippers. "It's been a long time. There might be bones buried in the mud. And if her clothes were made of synthetic fibers, there might be something there. But Stan, please, be realistic. We're probably not going to find anything."

His eyes were bright with excitement, and I knew realism was taking a vacation today. "Maybe so, Eric, but I remember the concrete blocks. There were three of them . . . and it looked like yellow twine held them together. And then there was the chain, holding her feet down . . . the chain was black and red."

Flipper number two was now successfully on. "Black and red?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Like the chain was enclosed in a plastic covering. One link was black, the other was red, so forth and so on. That I remember."

I grabbed my mask and snorkel, but held it in my hands. "You remember a lot."

"Yeah . . ." he said, and then he stopped for a moment, and I knew that in his mind, at least, he was now twelve years old. "You know, I should have been scared when I saw her. Really, really scared. But I wasn't . . . I mean, I was upset and excited, but she was . . . even in the water, she looked pretty. Her hair floating around her, her face peaceful, like she was sleeping. She had on a T-shirt and black shorts, I remember. And I just wanted to get her out of there. To give her back to her family. That's what I wanted to do. Just bring her back home."

Then he suddenly stood up, no longer twelve years old. "Come on," he said, going to the stern, where the swimming ladder was located. "Let's go in."

Stan, being younger and more energetic, I suppose, leapt right into the lake, while I took my time going down the stern ladder. The water was cold, damn cold, and seemed to suck the warmth and energy right from my skin. I gingerly lowered myself into the water, and inhaled sharply as the cold lake water hit that particular region dear to me that's above my knees and below my waist.

Stan called out, "Come on, let's go, Eric!" So into the water I went, gasping from the cold, rolling over to wet everything, and I paddled out away some from the moored pontoon boat. Stan had already gone underneath, so I joined him in his quest to find the remains of a dead girl and finally, after all these years, to make it right.

I've snorkeled in Hawaii and the British Virgin Islands and the Bahamas, where the water is warm and delicious, and where the places underneath the waters are a wonderful riot of colors and shapes, from the underwater plants and coral to the amazing variety of fish that swarm around in a kaleidoscope of form and color. Snorkeling in those tropical places had always been a pleasant and comfortable adventure, something to talk about years later.

I wish I could have said the same about snorkeling in Lake Benjamin.

The world was different. It was shades of brown. That's it. Brown mud, brown rocks, brown plants, brown algae, and brown fish. Brown, brown, brown. Plus the cold. Oh yes, the cold, sucking away your enthusiasm and energy in a matter of seconds. I went down several feet and looked beneath me, at the mud and

the rocks. Off to the left was the form of Stan, eagerly searching, like a hunting dog, going to and fro, desperately looking for a scent.

I shivered and went to the surface, spat out the snorkel, and looked around as I treaded water. Stan surfaced about three feet away. "Anything?" he called out.

"No," I said, and I was going to ask him something but he was gone.

Christ, it was cold.

I put the rubbery tasting mouthpiece of the snorkel back in my mouth and dove again.

Each subsequent dive of mine was shorter and shorter in duration as the cold worked its magic on me, but on my fifth dive, I thought I spotted something. Back on the surface, I treaded water for a moment, then waved over at Stan, also treading water, and then I went down to search again.

Yeah. Right there, nestled next to two boulders about the size of easy chairs, was something covered in mud, something with shape and form and sharp angles. Something that wasn't natural. Something that didn't belong there.

Back to the surface, breathing hard, legs and arms trembling from the cold. Stan was now next to me. "Anything?"

"Stan," I said, "we've been at it for a while. Let's climb back up, warm up, get something to eat. Okay?"

He looked over at me, his face mask pulled back on his head, his face showing the familiar racoon-eyes from having had the hard rubber press into him for such a time. Say yes, I thought, just say yes so we can get out and warm up and rest up, and maybe after a hearty lunch and some beers, we can just call it a day and go home.

Please, I thought. Just say yes.

"Sure," he said. "Sounds good."

I closed my eyes in thanks.

"After just one more," he said, and then he was gone.

And I waited, my cold legs treading water, my arms moving in slow motion about me, hoping and hoping and—

The water next to me exploded. "Found it!" he yelled, his voice echoing in the cove. "I found the cement blocks! Come on, follow me!"

My younger brother went back under the water and I waited, and then I followed him. I had no other choice.

Stan was holding on to the blocks with one hand, sweeping

away the years of mud with his other, making clouds of mud hang in the water. He worked and worked until it was hard to see, so I went back up and he joined me, both of us breathing hard.

He said, "It's right there, Eric. Right there. Three blocks. Just as I remembered."

"Stan," I said, and then kept quiet.

"What? What is it?"

I looked at that face and I managed a smile. "Good job. Let's just rest here for a bit, okay? Give a chance for the sediment and the dirt to settle down, and then we'll go back. All right?"

He nodded. His face was wet, but not because of the lake water. His face was wet because of the tears.

Tears of joy, I'm sure.

We floated like that for a while, two brothers, not saying a word, until he put his snorkel mouthpiece back in and pulled his face-mask down. When we went under, once again, I followed him, the older brother following the younger brother, chasing after . . . redemption, I guess. Yeah, that was the word.

Redemption.

Back at the concrete blocks, Stan made a jabbing motion and made sure I caught his eye, then he gave me a thumbs up and pointed back to the blocks. Yellow twine, just as he had remembered. My chest was pounding so hard it felt like it wanted to crawl up my throat. More gingerly now, he started working his fingers through the mud. I joined him, and we worked like this over the span of five surfacings and divings, working our fingers through the muck, searching.

The sixth time we surfaced, I said, "Stan, we're not finding anything. No bones. No clothing. And you know what else?"

"What."

"The chain."

"Yeah."

"Chain that heavy, covered in plastic, should be right there."

"Yeah." His face was almost blank with exhaustion.

I said carefully, "Stan. Your lips are blue. We're both shivering. We're tired. We're gonna make a mistake and get hurt. Let's take a break and warm up. Okay? Let's just warm up."

And I waited and I waited, and then, for once in his life, the younger brother listened to the older brother.

"Okay," and he slowly made his way back to the boat.

For a long while neither one of us said anything. I was glad I had brought extra towels. Shivering and quivering from the cold, we

dried ourselves off as best as we could and then we stretched out on the forward seating. The weather was in our favor; during our dives, the overhead sun had heated up the seat cushions, and we both sighed in pleasure as we stretched out on them. With the extra dry towels we covered ourselves and lay there and rested. I was going to talk some to Stan, but I was too damn tired and cold, so I stayed still, my hair wet, my hands and feet still chilled, and slowly warmed up. I stayed there for a long, comfortable time with eyes closed, sleeping maybe, but not dreaming and definitely not thinking.

Surprisingly enough, it was Stan who got up first, and it was his moving about that woke me. On the small round table at the stern he had set up the lunch I had prepared, and we sat and ate steak and cheese and onion sandwiches, and munched through some potato chips and carrot sticks, and drank some cold beers. Not so long ago, deep in that damnable lake water, I would have welcomed hot coffee, but we had both dried off and warmed up. We ate mostly in silence, save for one time when he said, "You know what? I think I hear music. Is that crazy or what?"

I shook my head as I opened another beer. "No, that's not crazy. The Pinecrest Campground, it's just over that rise. I'm sure that's where it's coming from."

"Yeah, you're right."

So we ate and drank and kept warm, and I looked at the still wet snorkel gear dumped in the middle of the boat, and to me, they looked like prison chains. I dreaded the thought of putting the gear back on and going back into the dark and cold water. But as I looked to Stan, for the second time that hour, he surprised me again.

"Eric?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go back to the cottage and call it a day."

I thought about trying to argue it out of him, but why? So instead I smiled and gently slapped him on the shoulder, and we got ready to head back.

On the way home, I took it slow and easy. Stan was beside me, towels wrapped around him. I looked at him again and again as we got closer to the cottage, and I said, "Stan?"

"Yeah?"

"Excuse me for saying this but . . . damn it, you look happy. You look really happy."

The grin I had noticed on his face had gotten wider. "You bet I am. And why the hell not?"

"Okay, I'll bite. Why in hell are you so happy?"

And then he came over and squatted next to me and hugged my shoulders and said, "Because I was right, damn it! I was right! She was there . . . those concrete blocks prove it. Three of them, tied together in yellow twine."

"But we didn't find anything else. The chain. Bones. Her clothing."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is that there's evidence, Eric. Evidence that I wasn't imagining things, wasn't making it up. You see what I mean? Even without the chain or bones or clothing . . . it really happened. I wasn't crazy. And now . . . now you believe me."

I said carefully, "Always believed you, Stan."

He hugged my shoulders again. "Nice try, Eric. Nobody believed me. Nobody. But now . . . now it's for real. I feel . . . I feel good. I just wish, well, it's been a long time. That's all. Fifteen years. A hell of a long time."

Stan sat back and hugged himself this time, still smiling, and I found myself smiling back. So there you go. Redemption, after all.

Poor Stan. He kept on grinning, but as we got closer to the cottage, he started wiping at his eyes, and I did the smart big brother thing and kept my mouth shut.

That night, our meal was take-out lobster dinners. Afterwards, we sat out on the porch and listened to the loons and watched lightning play in the distance. I was tired and tingly and couldn't move much after the heavy meal and two glasses of wine. Stan looked tired but he still looked happy. He sat next to me in an old wicker chair, so tired, I think, that he didn't bother to turn on the radio.

He said, "Ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"You're the writer. Who do you think she was? I mean, one of the things working against me when I was a kid is that there was no report of a missing girl. No missing girl meant nobody could have been in the cove. But who was she?"

I sat there, the second glass of wine balancing on my full belly. "You know, I was thinking about that when we motored back. The way I see it, she had to be a transient. Someone not from around here. Someone who wouldn't be missed."

"So who killed her?"

I shrugged. "Who knows? I'm sure there's a story there."

He turned to me, smiled. "Come on, Eric. You're the writer. Tell me a story."

I stretched some. It felt good. Time for a tale, then. "Okay. Here's

a story. She's up here with people she's not related to. Maybe a group of guys. Bikers, maybe. Hell, they've been known to tear up the Pinecrest Campground on occasion. Up here, and something happens. Maybe she pisses somebody off. Or steals something. Or threatens to go to the cops about something criminal she'd witnessed. So she gets killed. Now there's a body to dispose of, and quickly. What do you do? Spend a long time digging a hole? Or do you get some concrete blocks and dump her in an isolated cove? Which makes more sense?"

He nodded, eyes wide. "Yeah. That makes sense. You know . . . I wish Uncle Tom were still alive. He knew everybody on the lake, even the people who ran that campground. Bet he'd know something, if he started asking."

"Maybe so," I said.

Stan rubbed his hands together and said, "So, what happened to the body, do you think?"

"Fifteen years. A long time. Fish do their thing, the bones get moved around. Lake freezes up, opens up, and that's repeated fifteen times. Ice shifts and moves, evidence gets scattered. And maybe that chain gets caught on the anchor of some trout fisherman and gets yanked and dropped someplace else. Lots of explanations. You know . . ." and then I stopped.

He looked at me. "What?"

I took a breath. "Stan, do you want to call the cops on this?"

"Huh?"

"Do you want to call the cops? I mean, there is some evidence there, though not much. The cops could get divers in there, start searching, and—"

He interrupted me, like I thought he would. "No. Good suggestion but . . . no. It's been too long, you know? And if the cops get involved and nothing gets found, then it's old nutso Stan, screwing up again. This way . . . this way, I know what happened. You and me. I just know that it really happened, that I wasn't making it up."

I reached over, just gently tapped the back of his hand. "Good for you Stan. And . . . you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm . . . I'm glad for you, Stan. Really am. I hope you can find some . . . hell, it sounds corny. I just hope you can find some peace or something."

His face was the most relaxed I had seen in years. Or ever. He reached out and picked up the copy of *Coliseum* and placed it in his lap. Rubbed the cover. "You know, that sounds right, Eric. It really does."

So then it came to me, as I looked at him and looked at the book and looked at his face, and looked at my brother, now different, now no longer haunted, and I said, "Stan?"

"Yeah?"

"The parole officer, he set you up with a job, right?"

He said, "Yeah. Stocking shelves at a Hannaford's Supermarket. I start next week."

"You interested in doing something else?"

"Like what?"

And I thought of what my wife Marie might say, would say, and thought, oh, what the hell.

"I need somebody," I said. "Research assistant. Office assistant. Somebody to answer my snail mail, my e-mail, go to the library to look up stuff in books and such. Do some Internet research. Won't pay much more than that grocery store, but you could set your own hours and—"

"Yes," he said, eyes glistening yet again. "Yes . . . Eric, oh, shit, that'd be great. You sure? Are you really sure?"

I picked up my wineglass. "As sure as anything," I said.

That night I woke up again on the porch, wondered what had disturbed me. So I lay there for a while and listened, and all I heard were the frogs and the haunting calls of the loon. I stayed like that for a while, waiting to hear a cry or a moan from my brother, but there was just a gentle snoring. My brother was sleeping well. Was sleeping quite well.

Then I remembered a suggestion Stan had made earlier, on our way down to the dock and the moored pontoon boat.

I got up from the couch and walked out of the porch, after slipping on a pair of deck shoes. I had on shorts and a T-shirt. Outside it was warm and still. A near full moon had risen up, illuminating everything like it was almost dawn.

I walked some more, off to the right, and smiled at the thought that I was now trespassing, now on the forbidden Mulligan property. I wondered what Mom would think of her perfect son if she knew that. Before me was the cottage and its decaying porch. I walked to it and knelt down and tugged at a loose board, and reached in and grabbed something, and strolled out to the dock. I stood there at the end of the dock, where the quiet pontoon boat was moored, and I looked out to the cottage, where my younger brother slept, where my younger brother was finally at peace, where my younger brother finally had a future.


I cleared my throat. "Time for another story, Stan. About a teenage boy who has his life planned out, knows where he's

going and what he's doing. A boy who's tempted by a girl from New York, a runaway working the summer at the campground, a girl he secretly sees all summer long, a girl who announces at the end of the summer that she's pregnant and she wants to get married. Right away. And the boy is not going to let that happen, and he makes sure it's taken care of, and later, he makes sure the evidence is moved. Just to be safe."

So I hefted the heavy chain in my hand, the chain with the red and black color combination. Still tied about the chain, years later, are a pair of black shorts and a white T-shirt and a tan lace bra and matching panties. I take the chain and the clothing and throw it as far as I could, out into the lake, where it made a very satisfying splash.

Like I said before.

Redemption, after all. 🐦



Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available
in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

When he was working on *Bon Voyage* in London at Claridge's Hotel with a group of Free French Forces technical advisors, such as Claude Dauphin, who helped with the dialogue, Hitchcock realized that "the Free French were divided against one another, and these inner conflicts became the subject of the next film, *Aventure Malgache*." Indeed, *Aventure Malgache*, set in Pétainist-occupied Madagascar, is a story about a lawyer who, as the brains behind the local Resistance movement, must cope with a corrupt Vichy-ite police chief and a jealous girlfriend of a Resistance fighter who threatens to betray his mission. Yet the film revealed too many latent tensions, not the least of which was an anti-British sentiment among the French (at one point, one of the characters criticizes the British for having "stolen" the West Indies and Canada from France; at another point, the British are thought of as "the least worst" alternative between two evils rather than as a positive ally). Because the film presented such a divided situation in the Vichy-occupied colonies as well as within the resistance, which was shown to be heavily infiltrated by spies and collaborators, the film was shelved and only released on cassette along with *Bon Voyage* in 1993. Since both films were made up entirely of Free French forces, the actors remained anonymous to protect their families back home and were billed collectively as the "Molière Players."

If Hitchcock demonstrated such a devotion to France as to make those two films during the war, and then also by peppering his films with so many French references, such as the spoken French in *Strangers on a Train* or even *Rear Window*'s Lisa, whom Vest sees as a "character largely defined by her taste in French gowns, her acquaintances bearing French names, and by her appreciation of select wines," one must never forget the famous "*cas* Hitchcock" championed and debated among the young avant-garde future filmmakers of the prestigious *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s. Among these were François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer. Chabrol, for example, wrote extensively about his conception of Hitchcock as a "catholic auteur" citing *I Confess* and its gallic influence (in addition to being set in French-speaking Quebec City, the film is based on a 1902 French play by Paul Anthelme titled *Nos deux consciences*). *Télérama* film critic Gilbert Salactas even considered *Rear Window* to be "an allegory of society." Numerous issues of *Cahiers du cinema* were devoted to Hitchcock, and he would grace several of its covers or fill certain issues with interviews and pictures. Hitchcock classics such as *The Lady Vanishes* and *The Thirty Nine Steps* were constantly reissued and celebrated in Parisian movie theaters (and still are to this day; there is at least one Hitchcock retrospective every year in the Latin Quarter revival houses where Hitchcock is still the toast of the town). As Hitchcock once joked

during the height of Parisian Hitchcock-mania in the mid 1950s, "*La nouvelle vague c'est moi!*" (referring to the group of young French filmmakers known as "The French New Wave," who were fascinated by him). Once, on the *Johnny Carson* show, Hitchcock, comparing himself to the suspense director Henri-Georges Clouzot, laughed as he told a story of how their films were taking a toll on a particular Frenchman's household: "A man's wife refused to take a bath after seeing *Les Diaboliques* then declined to shower after seeing *Psycho*."

Jacques Richard, director of the acclaimed new documentary on the great cinephile Henri Langlois, *Henri Langlois: The Phantom of the Cinematheque*, tells an amusing anecdote about Hitchcock, who is portrayed very lovingly in his film—Langlois and his partner Mary Meerson had a great affection for him. As Richard tells it: "Once, Mary went into a restaurant she loved particularly, but without any reservation, and had been told it was full . . . but she stared at a gueridon (a small table for coffee) and asked for it . . . when the bartender asked for how many guests, she answered, 'We are just three.'" When she came back in with the three guests, Hitchcock, Langlois, and herself, the bartender burst out laughing when he saw three quite very large people around a very small gueridon." Hitchcock is truly larger than life, Richard thought to himself when he heard the story. Indeed, the mutual respect and warmth between the French and Hitchcock can still be felt today. As Grace Kelly's character in *To Catch a Thief* cries out ecstatically to her Arsène Lupin-like companion, Cary Grant: "Did you ever see any place more beautiful?" Perhaps she could also be describing Hitchcock's relationship with France as well.

We are pleased to introduce two new authors this month. Gilbert Stack tells us, "I have always had a passionate interest in history," and his academic focus (he holds a PhD in history) has been the middle ages. "*Pandora's Luck*," however, is a tale of the Old West, where bare-knuckle boxer Corey Callaghan and his trainer, Patrick, travel the boxing circuit; in Denver, they meet the beautiful gambler Pandora Parson. Look for more of Corey and Patrick's adventures in these pages in the future. Dave Zeltserman, a software engineer who penned "*Closing Time*," runs the Web site *Hardluckstories.com*. He most recently published a suspense thriller, *Bad Thoughts*, with Five Star books. His first novel, *Fast Lane*, was published by Point Blank Press last year. In the U.K. *Serpents Tail* will publish his "neo-noir" novel *Small Crimes* in 2007.—Ed.

IT COULD BE MURDER

PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

Big Bull Benson flipped the wipers on, and the twenty-inch rubber blades made quick work of the raindrops that had accumulated on the Caddy's windshield. It was more sprinkles than anything else, and the sparse rain clouds had done nothing to block the sun from shining brightly. Rain and sunshine at the same time. The devil was beating his wife, folks used to say. Or was it the wife beating the devil? He couldn't remember which way it went or what it was supposed to mean, if anything. Just something he'd heard as a kid.

His was the last car in the funeral procession, and the trek out to the cemetery had taken just under forty-five minutes. It had been enough time to reflect on life in general and death in particular.

The problem with living a long life is that most of the people you know start dying off. Last year it had been Sam Devlin, now it was Charlie Evans. Three peas in a pod if it's simply looked at as the three of them being black. Three different pods if it's taken into consideration that Sam was older than Bull, Charlie was younger. And although the deaths were at both ends of the spectrum for him, Sam being the closest thing Bull had to a father figure, and Charlie, Detective Lieutenant Charles Evans, well, he'd always been an impossible to deal with, hard-nosed SOB.

And yet, they'd both been a part of Bull's life, good, bad, however it was cut, sliced, or diced. Now with Charlie gone, Bull knew a little bit more of himself was gone also.

A week and a half ago, Charlie had rented a room in a Westside hotel and an hour later did a header out of the sixth-floor window.

Bull could name a half dozen folks in one breath who were more likely to take their own lives than Charlie. And since his death, Bull had not come across anyone who knew him who was convinced Charlie killed himself. Yet that was the pronouncement from the police and coroner's office, mainly because, barring gut



Tim Foley

reaction, there was not the slightest hint of any evidence to prove otherwise.

The smell of fresh-turned earth mixed with rain filled the air all around him as he got out of his car, buttoning his coat against the weather. He smoothed down his mustache with his thumb and forefinger, folded his arms, and leaned back against his car, deciding not to follow the throng of mourners trekking through the mud to the grave site. Charlie's wife and a handful of other relatives trailed behind an honor guard of police in dark blue uniforms who served as pallbearers.

Reverend Jeremiah Wood of the Greatest Glory Baptist Church had conducted the services from a solid oak and highly polished pulpit. He was a long-winded orator, and Bull had thought the reverend had said all that could be said at the church, but the minister kept everyone in the damp, crisp weather a full twenty minutes at the grave site before the casket was lowered into the ground.

As the crowd hurriedly dispersed, one of its members broke from the ranks and came over to Bull.

"Bull," Vern nodded, his shoulders hunched against the weather.

"Vern," Bull replied.

They hadn't spoken at the funeral. Bull had been seated in one of the back rows; Vern had been up closer with the family. Detective Lieutenant Vern Wonler and Bull had known each other since they were kids. They'd run the streets together, rolled drunks together, but early on, their lives had taken different paths. After a stint in the army, Vern had become a cop, and Bull, thanks to Sam's tutoring, had become a gambler. Gambling had gotten him decent clothes, money in the bank, and the deed to his hotel, which he'd picked up a whole lot of years ago in a marathon poker game.

"I still don't buy it," Vern said, shaking his rather elongated face. He was almost as tall as Bull, and although he'd filled out some over the years, he was still a good eighty pounds off Bull's—what was it these days, two ninety-seven?

"I never had any use for him," Bull said, not being especially harsh in his delivery. "You know that. I'm sure the same can be said for him about me. I can count the civil words that passed between us on one hand. But it doesn't sit well with me either. I never figured Charlie would do himself in. Getting whacked in the line of duty, set up by someone he pissed off, that I can see."

Vern and Charlie had been partners years ago back at the old Moore Street Precinct. The precinct's boundary had encompassed Bull's hotel. And he'd gone head to head with Charlie a number of times, with Vern acting as a buffer.

The old precinct house had been torn down about five years ago, and a new, larger facility erected around the corner on Drummen Avenue. But most of the folks in the 'hood still called it Moore Street.

"Are you coming to the repast?"

Bull shook his head. "I paid my respects to the family at the church. Charlie's wife knows I'm around if she needs anything, although I don't expect to be asked."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I've got to put in an appearance. Maybe I'll drop by your place later."

"Be looking for ya."

With another nod, Vern turned and quick-stepped it to one of the black stretch limos the funeral home had provided. Bull got back into his Caddy, got the engine started, and switched the heater on. He sat there, letting the traffic in front of him filter out before kicking his ride into gear.

The Bull Pen Bar and Grill took up most of the first floor of the Benson Hotel. He parked out back, and used the rear entrance, going directly to his office. Hanging his coat in the closet, he started to check things out in the bar but changed his mind, instead going to his desk and getting the bottle of Old Grand-dad Whiskey out of the bottom drawer.

Midway through his second drink, he started to feel a little better. It wasn't the weather—the Caddy's heater had taken care of the chill on the trip back from the cemetery. It was just a funky mood he had to work himself out of. It surprised him. He'd never thought Charlie's death would've affected him this way. Not that he'd ever thought of Charlie dying. Disappearing. Yeah, that had been a thought. Just one day Charlie wouldn't be around anymore. It would've made his life easier a time or two. Beating the pure hell out of him. Yeah, that'd entered his mind a number of times also—he'd even relished the idea. But Charlie actually dying. He'd never thought about it, never wished it.

Now it was a fact.

By the time Vern showed up, Bull was in the bar helping out behind the counter. He'd pushed the funeral to the back of his mind, or at least managed not to dwell on it. No wakes were going to be held in the Bull Pen. There was booze to pour, jokes to crack, women to flirt with. A new nurse with the regulars from Jayburn Community looked promising. In her early thirties, Bull guessed. A woman with meat on her bones in the right places and no wedding ring. He'd popped for the group's second pitcher of beer, learned her name was Fran and that she'd recently moved here from Milwaukee.

Vern came in before he'd gotten much further.

He wasn't alone; a beefy white dude saddled up to the bar with him. Another cop, no doubt. Bull had seen him at the funeral sitting with some of the folks from Moore Street. He had a thick mat of reddish brown hair, thin eyebrows, a wide mouth framed by heavy jowls. Bull didn't like him. Blame it on first impressions.

"Bull," Vern said, nodding toward the white dude. "Fabian Murphy. He and Charlie been partnered up for the past few months."

"I thought Armstrong was Charlie's partner."

"He rotated downtown. I came in from Vice, North District. Get a shot at doing some real police work."

"Fabian, hell of a name."

"I go by Murph."

"I would too."

Murph grinned. "Bull's not your typical moniker either—who tagged you with that?"

Bull shrugged. "Folks I kept running over, I guess."

Another big grin from Murph. "Charlie always said you were a hard-ass."

"We had that in common."

"If you two are finished with your pissing contest," Vern said, "I'll have a beer."

Vern slipping into the referee spot brought home to Bull the edginess of his and Murph's conversation. He hadn't meant for it to happen; nothing was thought out or planned. The friction was just there. Not that he got along with most cops. There were some he did, and some he had no use for. Just how Murph had fallen into the latter category so quickly was a puzzle to him.

Bull slid a mug of beer across the counter to Vern, tilted a mug to Murph who nodded his okay, and filled a mug for him from the tap also.

Vern was the first to speak after a hefty swallow. "You know, Charlie wasn't my first partner, but I partnered with him longer than anybody else. We kept in touch after he got transferred. Once a week we'd have coffee or lunch someplace."

"I didn't know that," Murph said. "Even when we were partnered up?"

Vern nodded. "It was kind of our time. Couple of old war horses talking over what was and what is. Every now and then we'd get together with our wives on the weekend, take in a movie or something."

"And he never gave you a hint that he was thinking of killing himself?" Bull asked, pouring himself a Grand-dad.

"Never. I've tried recalling every conversation we've had in the past month, and I keep coming up empty. Guess that's one of the reasons I still can't believe he did it. That and the fact there was no suicide note."

"Not all suicides leave notes."

"Most of them do."

"You're not thinking it could be murder?" Murph asked.

Vern shook his head. "Thinking Charlie let himself get tossed out of a window is just as difficult to believe as if he killed himself."

"We can't have it both ways," Murph said. "Either he did or he didn't. Either somebody did 'im or they didn't."

"Yeah," Vern said, draining his mug. He pushed it toward Bull for a refill.

Bull tasted his Grand-dad. "Look, it doesn't add up at either end, but you've had some good people on this thing, right?"

The detectives both nodded, Vern somewhat slowly.

"And they couldn't come up with anything else, right?"

Another dual nod, but this time Vern added, "I don't know how much the brass wanted to push this aside and have it done with, though. A cop suicide isn't something they want to keep in the headlines."

"A cop murder with no suspects wouldn't be the highlight of their day, either," Murph interjected.

"So what are you saying?" Bull asked. "The brass would rather it be a suicide they can forget about than an unsolved murder?"

Murph shrugged. "Why not. Hell, we're supposed to protect the populace. What does it say about us if we can't even protect our own?"

"I see your point," Bull nodded.

"So Charlie's name gets thrown in the pile with cops and ex-cops that nobody wants to talk about," Vern said, almost spitting the words out.

Along about the end of the third round, they still hadn't come to any satisfactory conclusions about Charlie's death. So they switched gears and started sharing anecdotes about Charlie, and although Murph had only worked with him a short time, he had a couple to add.

"We stop this guy. Old wino from the smell of him. I thought Charlie was going to run him in. Couldn't figure out why he'd bother. We're detectives, right? We're supposed to be going after the real crooks. But he gives the guy ten bucks and sends him on his way. Turns out the bum was an ex-cop Charlie knew from way back . . ."

"Tom Evergars," Vern said.

"Yeah, that's him."

"He and Charlie went through the academy together," Vern continued. "His wife and kid were killed in a car accident. He was driving. Never stopped blaming himself."

"Guess there was more to Charlie than I thought," Bull said.

Vern nodded. "I always told you there was."

Murph finished his beer, turned down the offer of another, and bid them good night.

"I guess I'm going to hit it too," Vern said, draining his beer mug. "Say, I've got tickets for tomorrow night's game, the Lakers are in town."

"Sounds like a plan," Bull said. He always enjoyed the stadium atmosphere, especially booing the visiting team.

"Cool, I'll swing by and get you when I get off my shift."

He tossed and turned for hours trying to get to sleep, but he just couldn't shake the idea that he should be doing something about Charlie. Why? Hell, he certainly didn't owe him anything. He hadn't made anyone any promises. But the feeling persisted. The clock on his nightstand said it was almost three A.M. The cops had closed the case. He didn't have any business nosing around. Not everything had to have an answer. Some things just were and that was that. All sound arguments for him to turn over and get some sleep. But . . .

The Monroe Hotel was a transient joint on the fringe of the city's downtown area. Hookers and their johns made up the majority of its clientele. There was a small, fenced-in parking area at the rear of the building, which offered about two percent more safety than parking on the street. Bull being Bull parked his Caddy on the street.

The old dude behind the glassed-in counter looked up from his magazine as Bull approached. He didn't bother closing the magazine, leaving it open to a double-page spread of nude women in somewhat less than artsy poses.

He adjusted his rimless glasses, scratched his whiskered jaw. "Thirty-five for two hours, fifty for four. Cash, no credit cards."

"I'm not here for a room," Bull told him.

"That's all we got here, mister," the clerk said, frowning. He was sitting on a stool behind the counter. Bull guessed if he stood he wouldn't be more than five-seven or eight, and from his pallor Bull figured he drank most of his meals.

"I need some information."

"This is a hotel, mister, not the Chamber of Commerce."

Ignoring the clerk's declaration, Bull asked, "Were you on duty the night the cop went out the window?"

The clerk gave Bull a slow once-over. "You a cop?"

"No."

"Then I don't think I've got to answer any of your questions."

"No, you don't have to," Bull said, pulling a hundred dollar bill off his roll and slipping it through the money slot. "Were you?"

The clerk didn't hesitate scooping the bill up and tucking it away in his shirt pocket. But he did take a moment before replying. "Yeah, okay, I was on duty."

"How did it go down?"

The clerk shrugged, licked his chapped lips. "Just who the hell are you anyway?"

"Bull Benson. I'm a friend of the family."

"Benson, oh yeah, I've heard of you." He adjusted his glasses. "Well, uh, he jumped out of the damn window."

"That's not what I meant. Was he alone? Did he look like he was expecting someone? Had he been here before?"

"Cops asked me the same thing about fifty times. Like I was going to change my story." He was breathing a little heavier now. "Look, I don't remember seeing him before. Not that he had ever been here. We get a lot of folks bouncing on our beds, but I couldn't place him. He was alone that night and didn't say anything about anybody joining him. He flashed his badge, said he wanted a room, and I gave him a key."

"He didn't pay for the room?"

The guy shrugged. "We try to keep on good terms with the police."

Bull knew how that went. He could ask to see the room, but that wouldn't prove anything. Even if it was empty now, which it probably wasn't. It had most likely been used three or four dozen times since Charlie died.

Had he learned anything? The clerk had seemed to get a mite nervous, but that didn't mean anything. Some people don't handle questioning well. So had it been worth getting out of bed, dressing, and coming out here? Only if he considered that the trip proved there was nothing more to learn. That way, he couldn't deem the trip a total loss.

He thanked the clerk, turned to leave, and almost bumped into Tessie Wickes and a short, balding white dude who was going to be her companion for the next two hours.

Tessie had been plying her trade for as long as Bull had known her, which was pretty close to fifteen years now. She wasn't a lightweight, but stout in the bust and hips. A pleasant enough

face, despite the deep scar at the right corner of her mouth. Bull had never asked her how she'd gotten it, and she had never volunteered the information.

"Hey, Bull," she said, with as big a smile as the scar would allow, then she turned to her companion. "You go get us a room, sugar, I won't be long."

He licked his thin lips, drawing himself up as much as he could. "Okay, but hurry up. I haven't got all night."

Bull watched him trot up to the counter. "Hey, I don't want to interrupt."

"Naw, don't mind him. He likes to show off. He's a regular, city councilman or something like that."

Bull gave the guy another glance, not being able to place the face.

"You're looking good," Tessie said, looking up to him.

"I can say the same for you."

"Well, it's not the same old bod it used to be, but it'll do. What gets you out this time of night? Don't tell me you feel like partying. I can get rid of this guy real quick, you know."

"Thanks. But I just had a little nose trouble tonight. I knew the cop who died here. Thought I'd get a firsthand look at the place."

"Yeah," she nodded, her tight little braids barely moving. "That closed things down around here for a couple of days. Had to take my clients up the street to the High Point. What a fleabag! Did you know the cop well?"

"Well enough," he said, not seeing the need for going into it any further.

"Tessie, you coming or what?" the white guy asked, standing by the elevator.

"Not yet, sugar, but I'm sure you'll take care of that," she said, which got a big grin from him. "Really good seeing you again, Bull. Maybe next time . . ."

"Sure thing."

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, he lit a cigar, pulling deeply on the tobacco. The night was cool and crisp, without a hint of the dampness the rain had brought. He got all the way to his car, the key in the door, when he thought of something else he should have asked the clerk. He returned to the hotel.

"How did he get a room on the sixth floor?"

"What?" The clerk was frowning again. He'd gotten off his stool when Bull came back in and was backing up slowly.

"The cop. Did he specifically ask for a room on the top floor, or did you just give him what was available?"

"Damn, now that was a question the cops didn't ask me before."

Yeah, he asked for a room on the sixth floor."

Bull wound up getting only about two hours sleep, waking early and downing a half pot of coffee before he began to feel somewhat close to human. A long shower just about brought him fully around. Charlie had asked for a room on the top floor. It would seem to indicate he was planning on making the dive. There wasn't much more for him to look into. Charlie had set out to kill himself and had been successful. Bull would have to get in touch with Vern sometime today and let him know what he'd learned.

Murph and Booker Johnson, one of the black detectives from Moore Street, were the first to walk in when he unlocked the door to the Bull Pen at eight that morning.

A couple dozen donuts sat in a plastic container behind the bar next to the coffee urn, which had just finished brewing.

Murph's nose wrinkled as he sniffed. "Looks like we got here just in time."

"Clay," Bull nodded to the guy behind the bar. "Couple large cups."

Clay Woodson, a light-skinned, wiry-haired dude who'd been working for Bull for about five months, filled two oversized mugs and sat them on the counter.

Murph took his straight. Johnson added sugar to his.

"You guys know each other?" Murph asked. "Booker's my new partner."

Bull knew Johnson well enough to give him a passing nod, or to take a few minutes to talk about the latest football or baseball scores. He was older than Murph, not quite as rounded in the shoulders. He had heavy eyebrows and somewhat of a pinched nose. He was also known to have a quick temper. Word on the street was to get ready to duck if he started smiling.

"I'll have one of those donuts too," Johnson said. "Glazed. Better make it two."

Murph begged off any donuts for himself, and the trio made their way down to the end of the bar.

"You know, Benson," Murph started, "Charlie had me thinking you were about the worst thing this neighborhood had to offer. I've got a different picture after last night."

Bull shrugged. "Charlie and me never shared any warm fuzzy feelings."

"Evidently." Murph took a sip of his coffee, then a larger one. "I've checked with some of the other guys around the station. Word is you've even been helpful in cracking some cases for us."

"More like things just happen. People tell me stuff, I pass it on. That's about it."

"That's not the whole of it, Murph," Johnson said, around a mouthful of donut. "Bull's stuck his nose in a time or two. We don't throw a lot of credit his way, but everybody knows what's going on."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Anyway, I was going through some case files Charlie and I were working on, just to catch Booker up to speed. I found this name in one of the files on a scrap of paper." Murph took a folded sheet of paper from a notepad he had in his shirt pocket and handed it to Bull.

Madison Street Max was scribbled in large uneven print. Bull studied it for a moment, handed it back to Murph. He didn't know enough about Charlie's handwriting to tell if Charlie had jotted the name down or not.

"I hadn't heard of him before," Murph said. "Booker tells me he's a reformed pimp who's now some kind of jackleg preacher. You know anything about him?"

"A word here and there, nothing special. Why?"

Murph shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. It was something that just didn't fit. Thought I'd run it by you before me and Booker pay him a visit."

"You're not thinking he had something to do with Charlie's death?" Bull asked.

"I don't know if he had anything to do with anything. But the way you and the lieutenant were talking last night, I got more questions about the dive Charlie took than I had before. So I'm going to go talk to this Madison Street Max. But I wanted to get your take on this guy before I did. And, uh, well, I'd appreciate it if you'd put some feelers out, or whatever it is you do."

It was a simple enough request. Bull didn't have any reason to turn it down, although from what little he knew about Madison Street Max, murder had never been one of the things he'd been associated with.

He told Murph this, and added, "We used to run into each other every now and then. But I don't think I've even seen him in the last two years or so. Since the religion bug bit him in the ass."

"Think it's just a front?"

"Could be, but as I said, I don't know him that well. We never had any dealings with one another." Bull paused. "I can't give you any guarantees, but if you think it will help, I'll ask around. See what I can come up with."

"Thanks, Bull. I'm fishing big time on this one, but . . ."

"Yeah, I know," Bull said, then thought of something. "Look, if

it's not a big departmental secret, can you tell me what file you found the note in?"

"I guess I can," Murph said, looking over to Booker for a quick moment. "It was kind of puzzling to me too. It was in with a file we had on a rash of house burglaries on the South Side. Don't know what one has to do with the other, if anything."

"House burglaries. If it were in the suburbs or on the North Side, it's pros looking for the wall safes. Out here it's kids getting their first taste of crime, or crackheads looking for a TV or a DVD player. Anything small enough to run off with."

Booker nodded, finishing off the last of his donuts. "Got that right, Bull. Whatever they can grab and take to the next block and sell."

"Well, thanks again, Bull," Murph said, sticking his hand out.

Bull took it; Murph's callused hand almost matched his big paw. It was a firm handshake but not a contest. Well, first impressions don't always have to hold true, he thought. Maybe Murph wasn't such a jerk after all.

After the detectives had gone, Bull left Clay to handle the bar and headed for the phone in his office. Six calls and forty minutes later, he knew as much about Madison Street Max as he had before he started, except that Hazel Satterfelt believed Max was on the up and up. Hazel had done her time on the streets, twenty-five or thirty years, depending on which version of her life story she was telling. She owned three apartment buildings now and only did "favors" for special friends.

He'd fired up a cigar while he was on the phone. Half spent now, he flipped ashes from it into the ashtray on his desk, leaned back in his swivel, the springs on the leather chair taking his weight without a murmur.

Madison Street Max. Bull couldn't recall when he'd last seen him, or even thought about him, for that matter. Max had been keeping a low profile. Bull's usual sources didn't have any answers, except Hazel, who also knew where Max's church was located. Apparently, if he was going to find out anything about Max, it was going to take a face-to-face.

He decided to wait until later in the day, around three or four in the afternoon. He wanted to give Murph and Booker time to make their call, and leave some space in between before he showed up. He wasn't sure what approach they would try. Whatever it would be, his would be different—they were cops and he wasn't. That alone set them a world apart.

Naturally, waiting for what he thought would be the appropriate time to leave, the day dragged. Even the busy lunchtime,

which usually sped his day up, seemed to take forever. A couple of times he started to head out early, patience never being one of his strong suits, but he managed to hold back. He managed to hold back until exactly 3:03, when he told Clay he had to make a run and would return shortly.

Traffic was light on the expressway, so getting over to Madison Street took a hair under a half hour. He didn't have any trouble finding Max's church; there was even an empty metered parking space in front of the place.

He parked his Caddy and fed the meter a buck's worth of quarters. The church occupied the first floor of a three story walkup. The storefront window was painted a rich green, with HAVEN written in gold block lettering centered on the pane. In smaller print on the bottom righthand corner was REV. MAX IN RESIDENCE.

Bull expected rows of pews, or at least folding chairs and a pulpit of some kind. What he saw when he entered was a couple of tables and cushioned chairs—four for each table—a leather sofa, coffee brewing in one corner, and a plasma TV hanging on the wall.

Two women occupied one of the tables. They were both milk chocolate complexioned. The older one had a rather hard cast to her face, which said there was nothing out there she hadn't seen before. The younger, almost innocent-looking one was on the thin side, not skin and bones, but a sandwich wouldn't have hurt her. They'd been playing what at a glance looked like gin rummy.

They both looked up, but it was the younger one who asked, "May I help you?"

"I'd like to see the reverend. Is he in?"

"Back in his office," she said, tilting her head toward the archway on the back wall. "You can go on back there, the door's open."

"Thanks."

The older one rolled her eyes at him, then turned her attention back to the cards in her hand.

It was less than six feet from the archway to the Reverend Madison Street Max's open door. He sat behind a small glass-topped desk, made smaller by the stacks of folders and magazines at each end. He'd been smoking and sat the cigarette in an ashtray, a frown increasing on his dark brow. Then it smoothed out, and a smile rippled across his wide mouth.

"I'll be damned, Bull Benson." He stood, extending his hand. "Good to see ya, man."

He'd lost a lot of weight since the last time Bull had seen him, but the handshake was firm, showing no sign of feebleness.

"Sit yourself down, man. Rap to me. What's been going on?"

"Same ol' same ol' for me. Looks like you're the one who's made the big change."

"Guess I have," Max said, shrugging. He'd always worn his hair long, straightened to shoulder length. It was the same now, with the addition of a few gray strands. The weight loss, however, seemed to have made the cheekbones on his clean-shaven face more prominent.

"Quite an unusual church you have here."

"Hey, I've got to be different, you know?" Max smiled. "Actually, with the folks I deal with, this works better. I don't need an audience to hear me preach. One or two at a time is fine. If I can get through to them, lend a hand when I'm needed . . ."

"Why?"

"Why?" Max repeated.

"Yeah. What brought you from where you were to where you are now?"

"Is that why you're here, Bull?"

"One of the reasons."

"Well, you're not the first to ask. Lot of folks still find it hard to believe I've changed. Mostly it's the cops. I used to get pissed having to explain all the damn time. But I've just come to realize it's to be expected." He took a shallow breath. "I guess part of getting upset about explaining myself is that I really don't have an answer. At least not one particular thing I can point to. It was just one day I got tired of doing what I'd been doing for a good part of my life. Messing over people, women mostly. It wasn't what I wanted to do anymore.

"Not being a cat to do things at half measures, I wound up with this church. Went so far as to take a correspondence course to make the reverend tag legit. Now I'll admit I haven't taken as many women off the street as I put out there in the first place, but I'm pleased with what I've been able to do so far."

"Seems to me your former brethren can't be too happy with you."

"I'm sure they don't speak of me favorably; however, they know I'm no major threat to them. A big part about a pimp's life is show and flash, Bull. I don't march in any parades. I don't wave any banners. I don't get all up in their faces and challenge them. So it's easy for them to ignore me. I go about it quietly and simply offer a way out for those who want to take it. Is that enough of an explanation for you?"

It was as good a reason for changing one's life as Bull had ever heard. He'd heard a number of them, from being afraid their luck was going to run out, to causing the death of someone dear. In his

own case, he'd never gotten into anything heavier than strong-arming drunks. A life of crime was there for him, but thanks to Sam teaching him the beauty of a deck of cards and the sweet sound of rolling dice, he had not had to go that route.

"My turn again," Max said. "You gave me one of the reasons you're here, what's the rest of it?"

"Questions been popping up on how you fund your church. Some folks been trying to tie it in with the burglaries happening on the South Side."

"Cops again? You their errand boy?"

"Just doing a favor."

Max nodded. "Yeah, I remember now. You were always kind of tight with the boys in blue."

"One or two. There's still a bunch out there that don't like me."

"Well, go back and tell them I don't need any money from any burglaries. I didn't get rid of all my scratch when I was in the life. I own this building for one thing. And I've got enough other investments to keep me and my church going, as they say, for the foreseeable future."

He retrieved his cigarette. "My last vice," he said, sticking it back in his mouth and pulling hard until the end of the cigarette glowed red. He blew smoke toward the ceiling, leaned back, and asked, "If that's it, Bull, maybe next time you come by we can make it a purely social call."

"There is one other thing. Just how much of a pain in the ass was Charlie Evans being to you?"

Max shook his head. "Name sounds familiar, but that's as far as it goes."

"Detective Lieutenant Charlie Evans."

"No." He started to shake his head again, stopped. "Wait a minute. The cop that jumped out the window? Never met the dude. Somebody said different?"

"No. He had your name in a file. Thought he might have come by to see you."

"Now, last cops dropped by were from the local precinct selling tickets to the policemen's ball. I got a half dozen." He hunched his shoulders, tilting his palms up. "The new me believes in supporting law enforcement."

On his way back to the Bull Pen, the uppermost question in his mind was why hadn't Murph and Booker paid their visit to the Reverend Madison Street Max yet? There were probably a good half dozen answers, although he couldn't think of any. Max may have been no more than what he appeared to be, a reformed dude trying to reform others. But Bull had been fooled before. People

had lied to him, some whom he'd had more reason to believe in than the Reverend Max.

Bull relied on his instincts a lot, the vibes around him, whether he was in a poker game or just trying to get a handle on someone. This time around his gut told him Max was playing it straight or, at any rate, didn't have anything to do with Charlie's death.

The early after-work crowd was trickling in when he got back to the Bull Pen. Mindy and Joy were covering things behind the bar.

"Hey, boss," Joy smiled at him, as he came up to the counter. She was five feet nothing, light complexioned, with a blanket of freckles across her nose.

"Anything come up while I was gone?"

"Vern called."

"He should've tried my cell."

"I told him. But he said he just wanted to remind you about the game tonight."

"Duly noted."

"Also, you've got somebody waiting for you—back booth, nursing a beer."

He'd noticed her when he came into the joint, her short skirt and crossed legs showing a lot of shapely thigh. Too much make-up and not enough clothes. He didn't know her, but he knew the business she was in.

"You wanted to see me?"

"If you're Bull Benson." She was young, in her twenties, her chocolate cream face wrinkle free.

"That's me, baby," he said, sitting down across the table from her. "What can I do for you?"

People came up to him all the time, passing secrets, telling tales, and again, some even offering up out-and-out lies. He wondered which it would be this time.

She pushed her beer mug aside, her nails glossy red claws. "I'm Sweet Pea. Tessie and me kind of work together." When he didn't say anything, she continued. "We were talking this morning." Both cheeks sprouted dimples when she smiled. "Said you and her go way back."

He nodded. "We had some laughs."

"Bet you can still show a lady a good time." She straightened somewhat. She wasn't wearing a bra and her pale pink blouse did little to hide the fact.

"I don't recall asking Tessie to send me any candidates."

She shrugged. "No, that idea kind of popped in my head when

you walked over here. I always have to keep an eye out for future business."

"Can't fault you for that. But that doesn't tell me why you're here."

"Well, as I said, me and Tessie were talking. Just flapping our jaws, you know, like we always do. We got around to that cop that killed himself. And she thought I ought to come tell you what I told her."

"Which is . . ."

"I saw him that night, at the hotel. Me and a, er, client were just leaving, and we passed him in the hallway."

"You sure it was him?"

"It was the same guy whose picture was in the papers the next day. And I knew he was a cop when I first laid eyes on him. I've been able to spot 'em since I was eight. Know how your mind plays games with you at times? Thought the joint was being raided for a second or two."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No. More like completely ignored us. He was just standing there knocking on one of the doors."

The night clerk had said he'd given Charlie a key. Why would he have to knock on the door? The obvious answer was that Charlie didn't have a key and that there was someone inside the hotel room to open the door for him. Which meant, among other things, the desk clerk had lied. Looks like he had a reason to be nervous.

"Did you see who was in the room?"

She shook her head no. "When I got on the elevator and turned around, he wasn't in the hallway anymore. Figured he was meeting a lady friend, and she let him in the room. I've had guys do that, have me get the room and they come up later, like they don't want to be seen with me or something."

"Had you ever seen Charlie there before?"

A frown line scratched her forehead.

"The cop who went out the window."

"Him, no, never."

Bull let the whole thing digest for a moment. Her not seeing Charlie before didn't necessarily mean it was his first time at the hotel. The desk clerk had lied once, maybe he'd lied about that also.

There was something else she might be able to help him with. "You ever hear of a Madison Street Max?"

Her mouth sprouted into a crooked grin. "Hell, who hasn't? Tried to pull me from my man Toby back when I first started out.

I was working the North Side, little brown sugar for them white folks. Toby put a stop to him messing with me. Everything was cool after that—up to about a year ago when Toby got his self killed. Damn cops around there started acting like me and the rest of Toby's girls belonged to them, so I moved on."

"You saying you think Max killed Toby?"

"I don't know who killed Toby. I don't think it was Max though, he'd turned into Reverend Max by then. Saw him about two months ago. Tried to get me to quit the life."

"You ever think about doing that?"

She shrugged. "For a little while, right after Toby got killed. But hell, it's what I know. And I'm good at it."

He didn't doubt that part one bit. "Well, thanks for coming by, Sweet Pea, is it?"

She smiled with a slight nod.

He went in his pocket, slid a couple of hundred-dollar bills across the table to her. "For the time you wasted waiting for me."

She folded the money in half and stuck it in a small purse she had sitting with her jacket on the bench next to her. "While I'm here, you sure there's nothing else I can do for you?" she asked, batting dark lashes.

Bull thought about it for a while, then said, "Tempting, but I've got a bunch of stuff I've got to do." He started to stand.

"Wait a minute." She went into her purse, tore a back page out of a small address book, and scribbled a phone number on it. "It's my cell, just in case you get some free time."

Back in his office, Bull started to toss the phone number into the trash basket, but he stopped himself and put it in his top desk drawer next to his box of imported cigars. Hell, maybe he'd make time for her one of these days.

He fired up one of the cigars, enjoying the rich taste of the tobacco as the smoke billowed around him. Sweet Pea added credence to his belief that the Reverend Max was a reformed person. And if she had actually seen Charlie at the hotel, then the desk clerk had lied to him. So exactly what did it all mean?

Charlie hadn't been in the hotel room alone. Did he have help going out the window? Or had he taken the dive after the other person in the room left? For that matter, had there been more than one other person in the room with him?

Each question brought with it its own array of scenarios. Finding out how it had gone down was going to take more than sitting at his desk puffing on his cigar. He didn't have any of the answers, but he knew it all had to start with the desk clerk. Bull would have

to have another talk with the clerk when he came on duty tonight, more forceful this time. He'd persuaded people to share their secrets with a narrow-eyed stare, a gruffness in his voice, and the show of a clinched fist. On certain occasions, actual physical violence was a line he didn't mind crossing.

There was a knock on his door and Murph stuck his head inside.

"Hell of a day," he said, coming over and sitting in one of the chairs in front of Bull's desk. He shook his head. "Never got to check out that Madison Street Max character. Caught a hit-and-run that tied Booker and me up most of the day. Hoping maybe you came up with something."

"I saw him," Bull said, and told him how the visit had gone.

"So, you don't think that he had anything to do with Charlie's death?"

"I don't even think he knew him."

Murph straightened himself in the chair, nodded. "I guess that's that then."

"Not quite," Bull said, taking a last pull on his cigar before crushing it out. "I just had a visit with a young woman who threw some new information my way."

He told him what Sweet Pea said she'd seen at the hotel, leaving out her name, of course. He rarely broke the confidence of people who confided in him.

"You believe this whore?"

"It's something that needs to be checked out at least. I'm just waiting for the hotel clerk to come on duty."

Murph took a moment before speaking, as though he was in deep thought. "I don't think we've got to wait." He took a notepad out of his inside coat pocket, flipped a few pages. "Ted Ragglan. I've got his address right here; we can catch up with him now. That is, if you don't mind some company."

"Company will be just fine," Bull said, trying to figure out just how to play it. Murph had cupped his hands, but Bull had seen it was a blank page he'd supposedly been reading from. Going anywhere with Murph right now didn't seem like a smart idea. "Let me just check with my people up front, and we'll be on our way," he said, as he started to stand.

There must have been something in Bull's expression or the tone of his voice that gave him away. Murph had his gun out and pointing at him, a dark automatic, held steady. "This thing just isn't going to fly, is it, Bull? Better sit back down."

Bull reseated himself. "What's this all about, Murph?"

"The dumb act don't suit you, Bull."

"Okay then. I'm guessing this is somehow tied in with Charlie's death." Faced with the situation, it really wasn't such a wild guess.

Murph shrugged. "There you go. And if you didn't already know it, you'd probably get around to me sooner or later."

"You're giving me more credit than I deserve," Bull said. Beside his bottle of hundred-proof Grand-dad he kept a fully loaded Glock in his bottom desk drawer. But getting to it without getting shot first was going to take some doing.

"I had a hunch you were going to be a lot of trouble."

"You invited me to this dance."

"Yeah, I did. My lame attempt to get you off Ragglan's ass, for all the good it did. He called me last night after you talked to him. He knew your rep, and he swore you knew he was lying." Murph shook his head. "I've had that pervert under my thumb for years. He told you the same story I had him tell the investigators. But for some reason you got him rattled."

"That's why you tossed Madison Street Max into the picture?" It should've registered, a vice cop not knowing one of the city's biggest pimps, former or otherwise.

"I thought it might work."

"If it's any consolation, everything was working until I found out Charlie didn't have a key to that hotel room. Why did you do it?"

Murph didn't answer right away, the gun bobbed in his hand slightly. "He said he had some stuff on me from my time on the North Side. I got him to meet me at the hotel. One cop to another. Told him I was willing to name names."

"But it was just a setup."

Murph shrugged. "I didn't have much choice. I wasn't about to turn stoolie, and I knew Charlie couldn't be bought off." He paused. "I coldcocked him as soon as he walked into the room."

"Was Toby part of the stuff Charlie had on you?"

Murph grinned. "That another guess, Bull?"

"Just something that seems to fit."

"We didn't get that far, and I think this conversation's gone about as far as I care to take it." He slid his chair back, standing up. "I figure you've got a back way out of here. We're going to use it without bringing any undue attention to ourselves."

"I'm supposed to just go along with this?" The Glock seemed to be getting farther and farther away.

"Right now you're the only one I have to deal with, Bull. You're a dead man. That's a fact. But you give me any trouble and I swear I'll kill you right here. Then I'll do those two barmaids you've got working tonight, and maybe three or four of your customers. Hell, I'm a white cop in this den of crazed black folk, I might even get

away with it." He motioned with his gun. "Now you can get up, slowly."

Trying for the Glock wasn't going to happen. Maybe he'd have a chance of going for Murph's gun once they were outside.

The office door squeaked as Vern opened it and started to come in, his eyes growing wide as he took in the scene. Murph swung and fired, the slug chipping the door jamb as Vern jumped back and slammed the door shut. Bull made a reach for his bottom drawer; he knew he wouldn't get another chance, but Murph swung back to him, leveling the gun.

The sounds of gunshots and the office door opening simultaneously erupted in the room as Vern fired his gun from a crouched position. Murph didn't get another shot off. His body jerked violently to the three hits it took before crumbling to the floor.

Vern kept his gun trained on Murph as he knelt beside him and felt his throat for a pulse. Standing, he holstered his gun. "Well, this blows tonight's game." He turned to Bull. "You want to tell me what the hell just happened?"

Bull got to his bottom desk drawer, but it was the Grand-dad he brought out. He poured hefty drinks for the both of them. "I'd say you just restored Charlie's good name." 🐾



A VISIT TO THE GENDARMERIE

DELORIS STANTON FORBES

On the French side of the island of St. Martin in a fishing village called Grand Case we opened a shop catering to tourists. We named it Pierre Lapin (Peter Rabbit), and there we hired three local ladies to sew clothes of my design from fine sea-island hand-silkscreened cotton. Business prospered, slowly at first, but it picked up the second year. We enjoyed our busy island existence.

Grand Case as a village framed a two-way paved road beside the Caribbean Sea. The shore was composed of sugar sand; the natives were friendly; the tourists were plentiful. The bay was rimmed with small houses placed window to window; our shop occupied one of these. There was a grocery store, and across the street was a lady who baked French loaves every morning in an aboveground oven in her back yard. The smell of fresh bread awakened us each morning. There was a small restaurant with a Chinese chef where they "always had shrimp." Heineken beer was the island beverage. There were two churches, one Catholic (St. Mary's by the Sea) with a Dutch priest, and one Baptist, smaller in size but more enthusiastic. What more could one want?

A gendarmerie.

Grand Case's gendarmerie was housed midtown in a handsome stuccoed building facing the pier. The *chef gendarme* was an affable, good-looking young man from *la belle France* named Jean Luc.

In Grand Case we were just one happy family. Even my husband and I, the only resident Americans, were included.

The houses in Grand Case were located hip to hip. Our next-door neighbor to the right was Ellie Johns, a widower whose offspring had migrated to Connecticut. Ellie let sections of his house to temporary roomers, mostly Frenchmen who had begun to populate the island they'd heretofore ignored. They came

now, in various exotic species—sophisticated chefs, chic designers, artists, adventurers, gamblers, roamers, schemers—the whole motley spectrum came when jobs began to materialize in the suddenly popular tourist industry.

Living in the back of Ellie's house were Claude DuValle and his elderly mother, Martine. Claude worked nightly as a chef in Marigot, the French capital of St. Martin. He owned a white cat named Charles (pronounced Sharle—no s—but still Charley to me), who visited us through our wide-flung shutters when Claude was at work. Charley would slip in at night and bed down beside me, head on my pillow. I'd gotten very fond of Charley, he of the gold eyes.

I could lie prone, look back over my head out the window and count—try to count—the brilliant stars doing their sparkle act against a black velvet sky. That's what I was doing the night I heard a woman's cry—“*Arrêt! Voleur!*” Stop! Thief! Looking down, I saw a man run out from the narrow passageway between the buildings. He was running back to me, he had a thick neck and a muscular back, and he wore a multicolored, silky-looking shirt. He turned to his left and ran down the street. I watched him go until he vanished.

Come morning, Martha, my maid, told me that Claude's mother was very upset about the loss of her jewelry. He also took her money, but the jewelry was heirloom. In the States I would have considered it my duty to report my eyewitness account to the authorities for whatever it was worth, so I passed by the gendarmerie and told Jean Luc. For whatever it was worth. “I'm sorry, I didn't see his face,” I told him, “but I saw him very clearly. He was an islander, but no one who looked familiar. Claude's mother is very upset, and I don't blame her. He took her jewelry, she's most distressed about that. Well, let me know if there's anything I can do to help. My husband didn't see him. He was asleep. I was awake, waiting for Charley.” And then, of course, I had to explain who Charley was.

I thought, well, that's the end of that. Too bad, I'm sorry, Martine. But I was more than just sorry, the entire episode was unnerving. The thought that a *voleur* could creep into our peaceful village in the dead of night. No telling what he could have been up to.

Daisy, our bread lady, was certain of one thing. “You can be sure he was nobody from the island. One of those *étrangers* from off-island, that's who he was!” And Jasmine, the tiny Chinese waitress from the pier restaurant, shook her pretty little head and comforted me with “We got shrimp. We always got shrimp.”

A week later, a young gendarme tapped politely on the shop

door. His English wasn't quite as smooth as that of Jean Luc's, but he managed to communicate a message. Would Madame be so kind as to step down to the gendarmerie? Her presence was required. Of course, Madame would comply; Madame followed Maurice down the street taking the same route as the *voleur* in the night. And sitting inside the gendarmerie, back-to on a bench, was a familiar, garishly printed shirt on a muscular island back. Like a flashbulb inside my head, an instant picture left no doubt. "That's the man," I said. "That's him."

And that was that, I thought.

The next day, three gendarmes appeared at my shop door. Jean Luc led the small parade. The *voleur* was flanked by the other *flics*. (We say "cops," they say "flics"). He looked into my eyes; his were bottom-of-the-well dark with murky red-toned whites. Like an animal's eyes, I thought, like the eyes of Emile's boar housed behind a fence at the side of the house on the other side of the pond, which the road leading out of Grand Case circled. Jean Luc had yet another message, "Madame Cummings, it is necessary that once again you identify this man, Gerard Daniel from the island of Domenica, as the perpetrator of the crime of thievery from the household of Claude DuValle and his mother Martine DuValle."

The boar eyes were trying to see inside my head, or so it seemed. Not begging. Nor supplicating. Only probing.

"Yes, Jean Luc. I'm certain. I'm very sure. I'm certain."

"*Merci, Madame,*" responded Jean Luc, and they took him away.

I heard that they got the jewelry back, that he'd given it to a woman in Philipsburg on the Dutch side.

"Did Claude DuValle express his gratitude?" my neighbor Ellie wondered. I shook my head. "Ah, the French," Ellie said, with a shake of his white head. "I must admit they are rude. Sometimes. *C'est la vie*. That's the way they are. Sometimes. It is too bad." He turned to go inside his house. "They are moving from here, Claude and his mother. To Marigot. They think it is more safe. Marigot is not safe. It is more dangerous because there are more French there. That's what I think. The island has turned dangerous since times are better. It is too bad. Things get better but they get worse." And he shook his grizzled head. "Maybe it is better to let lazy dogs lie."

Martha, my maid (every American on St. Maarten/St. Martin had a maid), was more forthright. "Maybe it's not a good thing," she told me. "We think bad things happen when there's too much talk. Sometimes."

"Is that the reason that nobody complains when somebody—name unknown—drives through Grand Case one night and shoots Gilbert's dog? Chances are somebody does know the

name of the shooter, yes? But nobody tells."

She gave me a sidewise glance, looked quickly away. "We like to settle things among us. We think it's better. Sometimes."

"Maybe. Sometimes." A clear difference of opinion. But she could have been right. Not that it had anything to do with my visit to the gendarmerie, but Charley got hit by a car and killed. I found him, a lifeless, stiff little fur shape at the entrance to the walkway between the shop and Ellie's house. As I stood there in shock, Claude DuValle came out from his dwelling and discovered Charley's body. He looked down at him as he stepped over Charley and proceeded on his way. "Stop," I cried after the departing figure. He didn't even look back. Ellie, standing on his porch, had a comment. "The French, they can be . . . *froid*. Sometimes."

But Charley loved him. He must have known that Charley loved him. As soon as Claude came home after work Charley would leave my bed and run to him. Inside my shop, I wept for Charley. My husband buried him on the beach.

We began to get winds and rain; it was September, hurricane season until the fall. The islanders had a little rhyme about hurricanes that ended, "October, all over." We followed their lead. One morning very early in September we heard the sound of tap-tap-tapping, and when we looked out on the street we saw Ellie and Gilbert and other villagers wielding hammers on plywood panels, covering windows. My husband said, "They know weather is coming. I'd better get busy." Our building was constructed of poured concrete (the walls were three feet wide), so we felt pretty safe.

In our bedroom, I insisted that my window be left open. "I'll pull my shutters closed if need be, but I've got to see out. If I can't see out, I'll get claustrophobia. I'm serious, Bill. I must see out!" Which is why I saw the two people who visited Ellie that night. A man and a woman. The wind was strong, so I couldn't hear what they said before they went inside. As the wind was howling and the rain was coming in sideways, I finally had to close my shutters—somehow claustrophobia didn't bother me as much as I thought it would.

What turned out to be a tropical storm raged through the night. In the early hours, we heard someone calling our name, a neighbor from down the street, Maurice. "Madame Cummings, are you all right?" he called. The storm was easing.

My husband answered, "We're okay, Maurice. Thanks." To me he added, "I think."

We'd lost power, so we waited until daylight to get up. The tropical storm had gone to sea by the time I pushed my shutters open and looked out on Ellie's front room. It didn't look like Ellie's front

room—white lacy curtains hung at the windows and all the furniture was covered with white fabric. It didn't look like Ellie's house, the shutters were open, plywood panels were down. A leftover breeze fluffed the white curtains. A room all dressed up for a wedding? For a funeral. Neighborhood women wearing white or purple passed in and out, through the room into the rear of the house, while neighborhood men gathered on the porch and smoked. Ellie had died in the night.

Martha told us that Ellie had died of a heart attack. And the little bridge at the end of town had been blown away. The gendarmes were directing traffic around our village, but those who came from the Marigot side of town came anyway. People gathered in the street where they talked quietly.

"It was the heart," Martha told me when I inquired. But she didn't look at me.

"She didn't look at me," I told Bill. "I think she's hiding something. When Martha doesn't look at me, she's always hiding something."

Ellie had a big funeral at St. Mary's by the Sea, and the choir sang. It was the worst sounding choir I'd ever heard; that's another comment I kept to myself. That and the distinct memory of the man and the woman who came to Ellie's house in the night. The night he died. Of a heart attack.

The only time I mentioned them was to Daisy. The morning after the funeral when I went for bread I said, "Daisy, you see everything that goes on in this town. Did you see the man and woman who visited Ellie the night of the storm?"

She'd been shoveling breads from the oven onto trays, looking down at the bread, but now she looked up at me. She looked at and through me. One of the loaves fell from the tray. She bent to pick it up. When she looked up again she had a different expression. "A man and a woman? I saw no one, Madam Cummings. The wind, the rain—we took shelter in the middle room. Elwige, Ellie's washerwoman tells me Ellie dies of a heart attack. She knows nothing more. I know nothing more. No one knows more. Not even the gendarmes." And then the young gendarme Maurice came in for bread, and I watched while she gave him the loaf she'd picked up from the floor.

I've thought and thought about it, and I've decided I'm to blame for Ellie's heart attack. Because somebody thinks it was he who went to the gendarmes.

I'd like to know what the French do with murderers these days. They used to use the guillotine and later, Devil's Island, but I don't know what they do with them anymore.

Maybe they just keep quiet. And settle it among themselves. ♣

THE BOND THAT TIES

R. T. LAWTON

"I know there's been a problem or two, sir, but . . ."

Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, Bail Agent for the Twin Brothers Bail Bond company, was in the middle of rationalizing to Mr. Cletis Johnston, sole proprietor of said business, why once again he, Theodore, had failed to live up to the high achievement expectations of the firm. And further, as he expounded on *his* side of the matter, he hoped that his few minor mishaps and miscalculations over the last several months would not be reflected adversely on his annual employee evaluation, which they were now in the process of conducting. As Theodore well knew, a bad rating could be murder to his career.

" . . . but I am doing the best I can under the current circumstances," he continued.

"That's what I'm afraid of," replied the proprietor.

In this precarious moment of profuse perspiration, Theodore ran his left hand—the one with the now permanently rigid pinky finger sporting a two-carat yellow diamond ring—over his pale balding head to squeegee off the excess moisture gathered on his crown. The resulting shadow displayed onto the proprietor's rich mahogany desk from a baby spotlight in the ceiling gave the appearance that Theodore had suddenly grown a horn from the top of his head. This intriguing illusion, formed by the juxtaposition of head and uplifted pinky finger, caused Theodore to pause in place as his mind drifted over into a search for the proper label for this strange silhouette overlaying the executive desktop. After a moment's contemplation, his brain finally progressed along the word path from "eulogy" to "unicorn." It was at this point that the proprietor's telephone began to beep.

Theodore quickly closed his mouth and shifted his attention away from the aberrant image of the one-horned beast outlined on the mahogany surface. As Theodore saw the situation, any distraction in the current evaluation process was a saving grace. Thus,

he immediately took three steps backward to give Mr. Johnston a semblance of privacy. The irregular shadow abruptly disappeared.

Two minutes later, Mr. Johnston hung up the telephone, leaned back in his executive leather chair, and stared off into the dark recesses of the inner sanctum's high ceiling. As though deep in thought, he tented his long ebony fingers under the point of his chin.

Theodore observed quietly, hoping not to draw unwanted attention to himself.

The clock on the wall ticked off the minutes.

In time, the proprietor slowly began to stroke the silky black sides of the long bandido mustache that adorned the almost Oriental features of his midnight face.

Recognizing this familiar gesture for what it was, Theodore realized the firm had just taken on a new case, a difficult one, and therefore he, Theodore, was being granted a temporary reprieve on his recent failings. The employee evaluation was forgotten for the moment.

"That was my old friend the precinct captain calling from a cell phone untraceable back to him," murmured the proprietor. "It seems there was a strong-arm robbery at the Computer and Software Exposition at the Bay City Convention Center this morning."

The office grew quiet again.

After several minutes of listening to more silence, Theodore's curiosity prompted him to venture a question. "Somebody stole a computer at gunpoint?"

Giving an almost imperceptible sideways shake of his clean-shaven head, Cletis Johnston fixed his gaze on Theodore as if seeing him for the very first time. "It wasn't a computer the robber took."

"Oh," replied Theodore, who up until now had been mentally picturing a man dressed in a black ski mask and tan trench coat running away from the scene of the crime while juggling a monitor, minitower, and keyboard in one hand, and a large automatic pistol in the other. "So what did he steal?"

"A secure digital memory card."

"You mean like I got for my new digital camera? Those cards aren't too expensive. The guy should just buy a new one."

"In this case," said the proprietor, "the card had a much larger memory, and it contained the full program for a new operating system that the Nouveau Software Company planned to demonstrate at the convention. A program to revolutionize the computing world."

Theodore rubbed the bulbous tips of his short, almost webbed fingers over the stubble ends of his black, pencil-thin mustache as he tried to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

"Pardon me for asking, sir, but how did the robber pull off this theft?"

The proprietor arched one eyebrow. "According to the precinct captain, it was a highly professional operation. Someone disabled all the security cameras in the convention center at the precise moment the courier with the memory card, and his armed guard, entered the vendors' hallway from the parking lot as they headed toward the arena floor. Whoever planned this had the timetable for delivery, the exact route of the courier, and the power schematic for the security system."

"So, the thief stands to make a lot of money from this memory card?"

"That was his intention . . ." began the proprietor as he rose to his feet. With a deft, open-palm movement, Cletis Johnston smoothed flat the bottom half of his bright yellow silk tie against the backdrop of his pale blue shirt. The yellow tie, held in the upper middle with a black pearl stickpin that harmonized with his midnight skin, was surrounded by a new suit of shantung silk in a light shade of summer beige. Above all this, the proprietor's long drooping mustache gave the impression of a Caribbean pirate.

"... but, I think the Twin Brothers Bail Bond firm is the one that stands to make the money here, Theodore. Especially if we do it right. Seems the thief was caught inside the convention center; however the memory card was not recovered. Now the Nouveau Software Company is offering a huge reward for the safe return of their property . . . But perhaps there is a greater financial return for us if we sell the card and its program to the highest bidder. In any case, I believe it is in our best interests to take on the captured thief as one of our special clients. That way, we can find out what he did with the secure digital memory card."

It was at moments like these that the interior of Theodore's stomach dropped an inch or two. After all, the firm had gone the bail for several special clients who had met with timely accidents. Some had fallen from airplanes, or encountered rampaging taxicabs while crossing the dangerous streets of the city—albeit in all fairness it should be noted that the about-to-be deceased were walking outside of the painted crosswalks. Other clients had gone swimming at sea without the appropriate flotation devices, or had somehow otherwise managed to take up temporary residence in the county morgue. And in the end, it was the Twin Brothers Bail

Bond Company that had made an extraordinary profit upon the demise of their clients.

But it wasn't the fate of the clients that bothered Theodore. Nope, it was his own self he was concerned about. Once again, Theodore had a fair idea which bail bond employee was about to end up on the pointed end of the stick. Therefore, his forehead now tilted toward the floor.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Johnston?"

"Your part is very simple this time, Theodore. Since the precinct captain believes that Internal Affairs is looking over his shoulder—concerning some rather small indiscretions on his part during the last few years—he is not currently able to meet with me in person in order to provide the rest of the robbery details that we need. And he is afraid of scanners picking up his cell phone traffic in any prolonged conversations, which therefore precludes passing on the information in that fashion. However, he will have a trusted subordinate, with copies of all reports, waiting for you at a restaurant out on the wharf."

The proprietor scribbled an address on a piece of paper and slid it across the desk as he continued his instructions.

"You, Theodore, are to take a seat in the booth farthest from the front door. You will sit facing the rear wall. The informant will take a seat in the booth behind you, verify your identity, and then hand over the reports without you ever seeing his face. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir. What about the thief in police custody?"

"I'm sending Moklal Feringheea to obtain the thief's cooperation into what we will assure him is a joint venture of his interests and ours. Moklal will then make arrangements for the man's bail."

"But, sir, our pet Thuggee . . . I mean, our executive secretary, has no experience with our standard bonding contracts. You know our under-the-table agreements can be tricky. Let me go to the jail instead."

"Time is of the essence here, Theodore. Someone else might stumble over the memory card's hiding place before we determine its location. So you will be the one to retrieve the police reports, which will assist us in our planning. As for the Hindu, since he has attached himself to us for his own personal reasons, we may as well compromise him through his negotiations with the thief. That way it is in Moklal's best interests to keep the secrets of our firm until the day he dies."

"I see," replied Theodore as he considered the import of this last statement. He then turned for the door and hurried out of the inner sanctum as fast as his short stubby legs would allow.



Two hours later, Theodore, with a large manila envelope under his arm, returned to the bail bond firm. He was observant enough to note that the executive secretary's office outside of the inner sanctum no longer had that malevolent presence to bar his entry. That Thuggee must still be at the jail was his conclusion. Good. Theodore hoped the Hindu had gotten into some kind of trouble this time, instead of himself being the one to make a mistake and then having to face the wrath of the proprietor.

Without knocking, Theodore opened the door, advanced across the plush carpet and onto the priceless Oriental rug lying in front of the proprietor's mahogany desk.

Cletis Johnston looked up from the paperwork before him.

"You have the police reports?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you read them?"

Not sure what the proper response was, but wishing to appear as if he were on top of the situation and therefore prepared to be a team player with something to contribute, Theodore took a chance. At the same time, he tried to rationalize his answer just in case it was the wrong reply.

"Yes, sir, I did . . . but the envelope wasn't sealed, you see, so I didn't think you'd mind."

The proprietor tapped his right index finger rapidly on the desktop.

"Very well then, give me the details on the robbery."

Theodore extracted several reports from the manila envelope and arranged them in chronological order to give a timeline on the events at the convention center. He started with the prelude to the robbery.

"The monitor screens in the security room are fed by cameras focused on the arena floor and on the front and back doors. The supervisor claimed he was in the control room when all the screens suddenly went blank. The only monitor still maintaining a picture was from the camera installed in the vendors' hallway between the back door and the arena floor. Turns out that particular camera had been temporarily installed the previous day just for the Software Convention, and therefore it was not hooked up to the main system. It didn't go down along with the rest of the security system, which means it was the only camera to obtain a video of the robbery."

"What was on the video?"

Theodore read farther down in the report.

"As the courier and the armed guard passed a janitor's closet, the closet door swung open and a masked man disabled both courier

and guard with some kind of spray from an aerosol can. When they collapsed, the robber grabbed the briefcase and removed the secure digital memory card. At that point, the rear door opened to admit a crowd of vendors, plus two security guards arriving for their next shift. At the sight of the uniformed guards, the robber panicked and ran toward the arena floor where the convention was set up."

"What happened next?"

"The control room watching the one working monitor observed the crime in progress. They radioed the guards on the arena floor to apprehend the suspect."

Theodore shuffled the reports until he found one written by a security guard that had been closest to the vendors' hallway entrance onto the convention floor. The bail bond agent then continued reading.

"When the robber burst out into the arena, he quickly removed his ski mask and discarded it in a nearby trash can. The thief then slowed his pace and tried to blend in with the rest of the vendors. Unfortunately for him, the approaching security guard had already been alerted and therefore shouted for the robber to halt. Instead, the thief ran and the guard pursued."

Theodore halted for breath.

"Go on," said the proprietor.

"Well," resumed Theodore, "the thief, while looking back over his shoulder, tripped over a mop bucket being used to clean up a soft drink spillage in one of the aisles. The guard subsequently lost his footing on the same slick area of the floor and crashed into the maintenance man pushing the bucket. He suffered a concussion as a result of the mishap. The guard that is, not the maintenance man."

"Forget the maintenance man and get on with it," rumbled the proprietor.

Theodore looked for the report of the next security guard. "Yes, sir. Here we are. A second guard that had joined the pursuit took up the chase. He said he watched the thief turn a corner, where the thief collided with a clown carrying a handful of mylar balloons filled with helium."

"Tell me about the clown."

"Yes, sir. He is a representative of an ISP company, and the balloons were a form of advertisement for said business. The clown was supposed to give the balloons out to the children of passing conference attendees. Both clown and robber fell to the floor with the thief on top."

"And then?" inquired the proprietor.

"Both of them must've had the wind knocked out of them because a moment passed before the thief slowly got up and took off running again. The clown remained flat on the floor watching all of his balloons gradually trail up to the ceiling of the arena. That's when the robber ran straight into the arms of a third security guard. This guard arrested the thief and searched him thoroughly, but found no memory card."

"Something's missing here," said the proprietor. "Go back to the trash can and the ski mask."

Theodore shuffled to the next report.

"The police arrived on the scene and took charge. They searched the trash can, but the only item of interest in there was the discarded ski mask and the aerosol can."

"What about the maintenance man and the mop bucket?"

"The police searched the bucket, the mop, and the maintenance man who hadn't yet left the scene of the collision. It was noted in the report that the man is a longtime employee with no criminal record."

"How about the clown?"

"He was still lying on the floor muttering to himself when the cops showed up. They searched him anyway and checked his record. Nothing. At the request of Nouveau Software, the police then checked out the entire area and all nearby vendors on the thief's route of flight. Once again, nothing. It was early enough in the morning that the convention attendees hadn't been let onto the arena floor yet, so the police kept those people outside the building during the search and investigation. Only when all possibilities had been checked out was anyone allowed to enter or depart."

Theodore waited patiently while the proprietor gazed up at . . . Well, Theodore had no idea what Mr. Johnston was looking at on the ceiling. This was all beyond his comprehension.

Finally, the proprietor spoke. "Turns-out we have a problem."

"In what way?" asked Theodore.

"Our captured thief was reported to be a Serbian male with no recourse to the English language. Plus, there is no record of his entry into the United States," replied the proprietor.

The corner of Theodore's lips turned up in a smile at the thought of Moklal possibly failing at his first bail bond attempt. Even if the problem was merely one of a language barrier, the Hindu had probably not been able to arrange their usual bond requirements, and therefore in comparison, the situation had to make him, Theodore, look somewhat better in the eyes of Mr. Johnston.

"So if the Serbian didn't speak English, then Moklal couldn't talk to him and find out where he put the memory card?"

"Actually," said the proprietor, "the thief didn't get a chance to speak with anyone. When the jail deputy escorted Moklal to the interview room and unlocked the door, it appears that the Serbian was already dead. He'd been strangled with a yellow silk scarf."

"But that's how our pet Thuggee kills people," exclaimed Theodore.

The proprietor nodded his agreement.

"Exactly. And someone wanted it to look like Moklal's work. Fortunately for the Hindu, his law enforcement escort at the time gives him an alibi for this murder. However, it was Moklal's misfortune that the deputy jailer took his fingerprints anyway. As a result, the Hindu's relationship to an old-time Thuggee family in the north of India has come to light. I'm told our executive secretary will now be deported to his native country, especially since he too illegally entered the U.S.A. without proper documents."

Theodore was almost ecstatic.

"So that's the last we'll see of Mr. Moklal Feringheea."

"I think not, Theodore. As porous as our national borders have become, you and I will arrive at work one day in the next few months only to find the Hindu sitting once more behind his desk in the outer office as if nothing had ever happened. And we still won't know his true purpose for working at this firm. Quite sobering, if you think about it."

Theodore definitely felt sober this afternoon. He'd often lain awake nights wondering if the proprietor's twin brother had previously hired the Hindu with the intent of assassinating the proprietor at some future specified time. Only the order had obviously not been given before the twin brother went missing. Or as the proprietor liked to say, his twin had taken an extended vacation to parts unknown. But if the proprietor's name *was* on a hit list, then Theodore figured his own name wasn't far behind.

"Theodore, your thoughts are drifting again, and we have work to do."

"Sorry, sir. What do we have to do?"

"Because of the nefarious planning involved by the memory card thieves, and the use of a non-English speaking Serbian for the actual robbery, I suspect that our recent nemesis is once again at play in our backyard."

"You mean Herr Morden is here in the city?"

"This operation has all the markings of his style. The only question in my mind is, did the thief pass on the location of the memory card before his demise, or is Herr Morden's organization still

searching for it the same as we are? In either case, it would appear that Herr Morden has endeavored to entwine his venture into American criminal enterprise with our business of making money in our own special way. A true conflict of interests. I also fear he has not forgiven our interference in his earlier assassination attempt on the UN Secretary General, nor our subsequent escape from the trap he set for us at your cousin's bonded wine warehouse in the industrial park by the bay. It would seem that our futures are tied to each other until one of us is destroyed."

"What's our next move then, boss?"

"My job is to do the thinking for the firm, Theodore. But *your* next move is to get me the blueprints for the heating and air-conditioning system that was installed in the convention center."

"Where do I find those?"

"The Building Permits Office in City Hall should have copies. Go there."

Theodore checked his wristwatch. "But sir, I think they're already closed at this time of day."

The proprietor smiled as he raised his open palms. "Then you will just have to find a way in."

Theodore turned to depart the executive office. His mind raced ahead to alarm systems and a lock-picking gun. He also hoped he wouldn't run into anyone else at the Building Permits Office. Otherwise, he might have need of a different type of gun, one that shot real bullets instead of merely jiggling lock tumblers until they fell into place.

Much later that evening, Theodore dragged himself back into the proprietor's executive office. With a cautious step onto the expensive Oriental carpet in front of the mahogany desk, he kept his bulbous eyes downcast. His gray slacks and plaid jacket had several small tears in the fabric along with a couple of rather large rips on the outside, which exposed the cheap lining of his jacket.

The proprietor appeared not to notice the dishevelment of his minion.

"Theodore, I've been waiting patiently for your return."

At this point, Theodore was quick to notice the long-barreled pistol that the proprietor's right hand was resting on. Since the gun had no round cylinder to contain any bullets, Theodore assumed the weapon to be an automatic rather than a revolver, but not one of the small, easily concealed ones he was familiar with in his job description. Next, he wondered if the weapon had anything to do with his annual evaluation, which had been interrupted earlier this morning.

"You have the heating and air-conditioning blueprints?" inquired the proprietor.

"Not exactly, sir."

Cletis Johnston leaned back in his leather executive chair as if this were going to be a long session. The automatic pistol trailed along loosely in his right hand.

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"I encountered a guard dog as I left the Building Permits Office."

"And?"

"And I dropped the blueprints and ran for my life. You should've seen the teeth on that dog. After I closed a glass door between us, and he couldn't bite me any more . . . well, his fangs shredded the blueprints I had to leave behind. There ought to be a law against dogs like that."

"I really hope you have more than that for me to go on."

"Well, sir, when I was searching for the correct blueprint, I had to look over each one carefully to ensure I had the right paperwork, so I think I can answer any questions you might have about the air system."

The proprietor drummed his left fingertips on the desktop.

"Okay, Theodore, tell me about the air return vent for the main arena."

As Theodore started his verbal presentation, his eyes rolled up toward the top of his head as if he could see the answers written on the underside of his skull. In less than five minutes, he had described the flow of air from the cooling coils, out through the various registers around the arena, the path of the conditioned air inside the building, and then the four air return ducts high up in the ceiling, each duct having a mesh grate to filter out foreign obstacles.

"I'm impressed," commented the proprietor.

"Then this will be reflected on my annual evaluation?" asked Theodore.

Cletis Johnston leaned forward with the pistol in hand.

"That remains to be seen. We're not finished yet tonight."

Theodore felt a moment's hesitation as he contemplated the possibility of a rapid departure, but soon concluded the distance to the front door of the inner sanctum was way too far for him to beat a safe retreat. He'd just have to tough it out.

"What did you have in mind, sir?"

"The balloons were mylar, Theodore."

Theodore thought about mylar.

"Yes, sir. So?"

"Latex balloons usually lose their helium within twenty-four

hours. Mylar is less permeable, thus it can hold its helium inflation for several days."

Theodore scratched his bald dome.

"What's that have to do with the memory card and the air-conditioning system?"

"Think, Theodore, think. The police search of all persons and property failed to turn up the secure digital card, so where could it have gone?"

"I don't know." Then Theodore thought of the helium balloons again. "Up?"

"Exactly," exclaimed the proprietor. "I believe the thief's collision with the clown was the moment he began to realize his chances of escape were rapidly deteriorating. That's when the thief hit upon the idea of tying the memory card to one of the helium balloons. Using the balloon string, or some other sort of bonding device, he attached the card to the balloon and let it float up to the dome ceiling for recapture at a later time."

"Where will we get a ladder tall enough to reach the dome?"

"We don't, Theodore. By now, the building's air return system will have sucked the mylar balloons close to one of the four mesh grates protecting the air-conditioning ducts from ingesting any floating objects."

The bail bond agent frowned. "But how will we know which air duct the balloons are at?"

"Ah, Theodore, once more I've done all the real work, while your contribution to the firm's success has been minimal. Therefore, tonight, you will proceed to crawl up into the metal catwalks below the dome ceiling until you find where the balloons have gathered."

"How will I get them down?"

The proprietor slid the long-barreled pistol across the desk.

"With this high-powered pellet gun. You'll just have to shoot down every balloon until you find the card."

Theodore accepted the pellet pistol and stuck it in the pocket of his plaid sport jacket. He prepared to depart.

"One last item," the proprietor's voice carried softly across the room. "Don't take too long; even now as we are having this little conversation, others may be conducting similar searches. And I don't think you would enjoy any up close encounter with Herr Morden or his men. However, I am positive the return air ducts are where you will find the missing memory card. If you are successful in your endeavor, then we will continue your annual employee evaluation in the morning."

On his way out the door, Theodore pursed his blubbery lips in

deep thought. He started to wonder if maybe there was an easier way for him to advance his position in the corporate world, especially since the firm's pet Thuggee—Theodore found it difficult to refer to him as the executive secretary—would be out of the country for the next few months. This gave him, Theodore, some running room. All he had to do now was come up with a plan to exploit Moklal's absence.

But first there was the convention center to think about, the clandestine entry, followed by his fear of heights when he got way up on the dome catwalk, plus finding the right balloon and keeping a steady enough hand to shoot it down so he could recover the digital memory card. May as well shoot all the balloons. But if Herr Morden had also figured out where this same missing memory card had gone, then he, Theodore, would have to run a gauntlet of Herr Morden's men in order to return safely home. More shooting.

Theodore sighed.

This bail bonding stuff was turning out to be a rather tricky business, to say nothing about dangerous, with scarce room for mistakes. Yep, when he had more time, he would definitely have to think more about his future in the firm, something along the lines of finding a better way up the ladder to success without all this violence. Maybe if he took some correspondence courses in business management from that university with the post office box number in Tijuana? At least it was a possibility. Some extra education on his résumé just might help his annual employee evaluations.

It was a long way to the convention center. Plenty of time to think. 🐼

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

MISCHIEF

S. L. FRANKLIN

R. J. CARR:

"So what actually is a stud gun?"

"You don't know?"

"Nope."

The total ignoramus in this exchange was myself and the expresser of incredulity a man named Terry Swenson. Time: 2:55 P.M., Friday, January 8, 1999. Location: Swenson Equipment Rental on Harlem Avenue in Chicago. Subject: recovery of the item under discussion, which had been rented on the previous Monday but never returned.

"Well," Swenson said, "I'll tell you straight off that it's not what you might be thinking. We rent out contractors' equipment, not any other kind."

I nodded. To look at, Swenson was a lanky six-footer in his forties with an open face but a brusque manner. Across the office desk from him, I was busy being my usual half-wit deadpan self—six five, two-thirty, birthmarked, bespectacled, and pushing fifty-six that year.

"It's a—you know, just a little pistol, maybe twenty-two calibers, but it fires nails." He paused to reflect. "Into studs—two-by-fours—to attach to concrete, mainly. He took four boxes of loads too."

"Sounds dangerous."

"Not compared to a lot of things—jackhammers. Generators. Anyway, it's been a couple of years since I rented this one out, because even the little contractors have their own nail drivers now. The thing's outmoded, except for maybe a guy remodeling on the cheap."

"And this guy?"

"It's like I told you—the kid was a gofer for one of my regular accounts, only he wasn't. Not anymore."

"Uh-huh. How much does one of these things cost to replace?"

Swenson made a gesture of indifference, then said, "I haven't checked it out, and that's not the point. The kid put up two hun-

dred in cash bond against loss, so I'm covered there. I just don't want to have to go to the cops—that's what I'm worried about. But this is theft of a handgun, in a way. Fill it with regular bullets and it turns into a Saturday Night Special. Maybe not a good one, but—"

"My rates are three hundred a day and expenses," I interjected, even though I was getting six hundred that year. I've always been flexible, and I felt the way Swenson did—it was a job that needed doing.

"Fine." He stood up. "I'll take two days worth, then call me."

The kid's name was Jason Harnisch: brown hair, blue eyes, five feet eleven inches in height, one hundred ninety pounds, date of birth 9/9/77, place of residence Silicon City, California—or so I learned from the photocopy of his driver's license that Swenson

He'd stolen a stud gun. Fill it with
regular bullets and you have a
Saturday Night Special.

had made at the time of the rental.

"I knew him already, you see. That's how I got taken in. I remembered he was going to

college some place up north and working summers for L & L Construction through a family connection. Except when I called up over there this morning, the boss wasn't around, and the gal who answered said the kid hadn't been on the payroll since the summer."

The head shot on the license had come out fairly well on the copy, and in it Jason Harnisch looked cocky and callow, with close-cut hair, a full, immature face, and three-day's growth of beard. The date of issue on the license was August 31, 1997, sixteen months earlier.

"Does he still look like this?" I asked.

"Yeah—pretty much. His face isn't so fat, and—oh yeah. He's got an earring. My kid tries that and he loses an ear, but whatcha gonna do?"

"Find him, I guess, and hope he's not getting into mischief."

My first stop was L & L Construction about two miles west. Snow from the record-setting blizzard over New Year's was plowed into six-foot high banks in the small parking lot beside the business office, but in the yard to the rear I could see a Bobcat, a tractorlike affair with a backhoe, and various other vehicles all stranded in drifts that rose high up over the axles. The parking lot held one car when I pulled in, an SUV, and the office held one

person, a girl-woman of twenty or so who seemed to have spent the day making the air around her unbreathable with cigarette smoke because she had nothing else to do.

She buzzed me in the secured door at the front, then stood waiting behind a counter as I came through. She wore Levi's, a ski sweater, and a distracted expression, but otherwise she looked friendly and intelligent, and without the cigarette she might even have been pretty: five feet six at a guess, with pert features and toffee-colored hair that flowed down her back.

I said, "Hi. Are you the one who talked to a man named Swenson about Jason Harnisch?"

"Yeah, that was me." The distracted expression melted into a mix of curiosity and apprehension. "Who are you?" I gave her one of my cards, and after looking it over she let out an exaggerated sigh. "Oh boy. The idiot's in real trouble, is he? I was afraid of that." She tapped the ash from her cigarette, then went on, "All right—so what's he done?"

"Swenson didn't tell you?"

"Not much—something about a piece of equipment Jason rented for L & L. As if. We're down through the fifteenth, except for a couple of dink jobs. Dad and Mom are in sunny Arizona, and I'm here freezing my—never mind. What did he do?"

"Monday morning he rented a stud gun, agreeing to return it by Tuesday. The phone number he put on the rental form turns out not to exist, and actually Jason only insinuated that the gun was for your company, since the name on the form is his own. Not that that exonerates him. He's either irresponsible or up to something.

"Swenson's shy of bringing in the cops for a bunch of reasons, but he has to have the gun back—that's the point—and I'm here because he's willing to put out a little of his own money to recover the thing privately, rather than seeing the boy charged with a felony."

The girl stood there listening and smoking until I finished, then she mashed the cigarette in a tray with an angry gesture. "Sometimes I think Jason is a living, breathing felony. What do you want to know?"

"Anything at all about Jason Harnisch, but mainly how to find him."

The girl invited me around the counter to sit beside a large desk and offered me a Diet Coke, which I accepted. Then she slumped back into a leather chair and said, "All right. Shoot."

"You seem to know Jason. Tell me how."

A gesture. "Third cousins, or something. I'm Cathy Lindner, in case you were wondering, as in Lindner and Lindner Construction—only I'm the silent L. Jason—as to where he is, that's simple: Appleton,

Wisconsin. He went back Monday."

"So he goes to Lawrence?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You're bright."

"My son's a sophomore there."

"Oh. Well, Jason's a senior—kind of. He says he's dropping out. Why don't I start over?" She sipped Diet Coke from a can, looked at the pack of cigarettes on her desk and then at me and decided to hold off for a while.

"Jason's folks divorced about ten years ago, and God knows where his father went off to. His mother—that's my mother's second cousin—she remarried about four years ago to an exec at Motorola, only he jumped to Intel—I think it was—and so they moved out to California. Jason hates his stepfather and he hates California. I said he was an idiot, didn't I? So he's spent a lot of time here with us in the summer mooching off my mom and dad's good humor. This is the first Christmas we've had him, though—not that we saw him much."

"Why not?"

"We-e-ll . . . I was working here, what work there is. Dad and Mom left Christmas night, and Jason was gone in the evenings. I don't know where. We weren't talking much."

"Nobody I know went out last Friday and Saturday, though. You couldn't drive five blocks where I live in Elm Grove."

The girl had been avoiding me with her eyes, and not for the standard reason, I thought. She finally looked at me directly and exhaled audibly at the same time. "You're being awfully nosy, you know. All right. Off and on Jason has had the idea we ought to be closer than third cousins, especially if I'm not dating anybody and we're alone in the house. I'll say it one more time: he's an idiot."

"But you're not."

"Is this about me or Jason?"

"I'm just trying to figure out, Ms. Lindner, why he used subterfuge to obtain a dangerous piece of equipment that doubles as a handgun and then failed to return it."

"Do you mind?" She had a cigarette out of the pack and lit in about two seconds whether I minded or not. "If I *am* an idiot, it's because I let Jason worry me. He's such a loser, and when I—you want the truth, so here it is—he tried to hit on me when we were snowbound, and I pinned his ears back, as my gramps used to say. That was last Friday, so it's been a week, New Year's Day around lunchtime. He stayed in the guest room sulking and soaking up beer until Sunday, and I left him alone because I didn't want to give the impression that I was feeling sorry."

"Not a good weekend, in other words. I get the picture. But

what about those evenings when he went out? You honestly don't have any ideas about where he went?"

"Honestly?" Blood rose into the girl's cheeks. "Honestly, I think he had a job someplace, and the stupid mutt's got me covering for him, so I am an idiot. He came here for Christmas, you see, because he wanted to work for L & L, free room and board courtesy of Hank and Marilyn Lindner, only we haven't got any work. We've got three crews doing nothing until spring, two down until the fifteenth, and—"

When the phone rang she jumped to answer it and sounded cordial and efficient for the next three or four minutes concerning a construction bid. Then she wrote on a form after hanging up, consulting a computer screen half the time.

"Sorry," she said when she glanced back in my direction. "But even Jason has to wait for business. I just remembered something, though. Sunday morning the phone rang at home while he was in the shower, and it was a woman who wanted him to call back right away. Cindy at Berkham's."

"Did he do it?"

"Yep. And then he got dressed in a hurry and took off. In fact, that's the last time I saw him, although he did call me here Monday morning to say he was just leaving for Appleton to hunt for work up there."

"So he has his own car? What kind?"

A shrug. "Old and medium sized. To be honest, I don't pay attention to cars."

"Then let's try a different question. Do you have a phone book with a business listing?"

After pondering for a moment, she said, "Wow—you *are* bright. Or I'm not, more likely." She brought a stack of directories around the desk and stood next to me while I hunted through the B's in the largest book.

"That's it! I remember the number." She jabbed a finger at the only Berkham on the page, highlighted in boldface: BERKHAM TRUCK RENTALS. "WE SPECIALIZE."

"You're sure?"

"Ninety-nine percent." She carried the directory back around the desk and sat, then punched numbers before handing the phone receiver to me.

"Berkham's," said a voice. "Dave speaking."

"Hi. This is R. J. Carr of Carr Investigations and Security. I need to ask a few questions about a former employee of yours named Jason Harnisch. According to my information he only worked there for a couple of weeks at night, so you may not—"

"Harnisch? Oh—*that* kid." A ten second silence. "Okay—what do you want to know?"

"Did he leave voluntarily? Or was he fired?"

"That's straight to the point. Without asking the boss, though, I'd say that it's also confidential information."

"Uh-huh. So the reason he was fired must be confidential too."

"Well . . ." Another long pause.

"Could you tell me if he threatened anyone?"

"Uh . . . not that I heard. Carelessness. I've just been informed that he was dismissed for carelessness, and we're looking into the matter."

"What matter?"

"I'm sorry, but even if you really don't know, it's definitely confidential."

"I really don't, but I'll be calling again."

Throughout the conversation Cathy Lindner sat watching me with an anxious air about her, playing with a cigarette without lighting it. "He was dismissed for carelessness," I told her as I handed the receiver back. "No other details, unfortunately."

I stood and looked down at her from across the desk. "Are you sure he went back to Appleton, Ms. Lindner? Because it seems like he had a pair of good reasons to stick around Chicago, if he wanted to make trouble with the stud gun."

All at once the girl sighed with such bitterness that I was genuinely startled, not something that happens much with me.

"You won't let me keep even one secret, will you!" she cried. "I'm sure because he tried to call me collect from Appleton about eleven o'clock last night, and I refused the charges. And I'm sure because he tried it again here at work this morning, and I still refused. So naturally, I feel like a real jerk right now!"

"You shouldn't."

"Of course I should. You don't know." She rose up from behind the desk and made a sweeping gesture as she spoke. "Being heir apparent to the vast Lindner construction empire is somewhat lonely, as you may have noticed. And right before Jason left last summer he and I got very palsy in an innocent, cousinly way. Palsy, nothing more, but I thought . . ." She made another gesture, one of defeat. "Out of sight, out of mind. So when he got out of sight, I was out of my mind to let it bother me. It's pretty depressing, though, to send your chatty e-mails into a black hole, especially since I'm down here not going to college and he's up there with buddies galore. So now we're not palsy or even close, but for some reason he suddenly refused to take any more money from his step-father and decided to drop out. As big an idiot as he is, I've just

been mean not to admit that he was having problems and maybe needed me to talk to a little. "And that, Mr. Carr, is every secret I have—I think."

STEVE CARR:

An e-mail from Dad was a rare thing, and when I put the question to him once, he explained that from a detective's standpoint, face-to-face was best, and while a live voice on the phone was a poor substitute, it was still a live voice.

Problem: My live voice that Friday night was in Green Bay cheering on the Varsity team, along with the other J.V. team voices, and we didn't get back to Lawrence till midnight.

Dear Steve,

I tried calling and got no answer, but this won't wait, so I hope you check your e-mail the way you usually do. There's a Lawrence student named Jason Harnisch I'd like you to look up for me first thing tomorrow (Saturday). He's an off-campus senior or a dropout, address last semester 1722 Martin, #8. If it isn't close, take a cab, and I'll reimburse.

The short of it is, he's absconded with a construction tool called a stud gun, a .22 that fires nails, and he's in a depressed emotional state. What I'd like is for you to find out what you can about him and even talk to him, if possible, on some school pretext. If you make contact and it isn't too big a time drain, also keep an eye on him till I get there mid afternoon.

Sorry to impose, and if you can't do it, no big deal. I'll explain tomorrow. Your mother says to be careful. Not like me. Also, I've just been told she's coming too.

Love from the old folks.

Oh—Harnisch's phone's been disconnected and he seems short on funds. 5'11", 190 lbs., dark hair cut close, an earring. If you hear that he has a strong grudge against anyone, look out for mischief. Hope nothing's happened yet. And pray for no blizzards this weekend.

Well, Appleton's a decent-sized city, and Martin Avenue on my map turned out to be an older street a little way beyond downtown, so I was able to hop a bus for all but four blocks.

As for some other things in the e-mail: 1) Lawrence students weren't encouraged to live off campus, but seniors over twenty-one got a pass; 2) I'd never heard of Jason Harnisch, but I didn't know many seniors; 3) I'd only helped Dad on a case maybe three times and nothing important, so doing some real detective work

for once wasn't anything I'd pass up regardless. But as a favor to Dad, I would have staked out Mafia headquarters—a thing that Mom understood and didn't like, even though I knew for a fact that she would have done the same and *had*—or similar things at least as dangerous.

The temperature was about five degrees, and snow was falling when I got up—later than I should have, to be honest, eight thirty. But I made up for it some by skipping breakfast and catching the nine o'clock bus. Martin Avenue was in a pretty decrepit section of town, where half the sidewalks hadn't been shoveled, so my four block walk over packed snow and ice was the hardest part of the day.

I was expecting to find an apartment building, but 1722 was an enormous old frame house with an addition tacked on the back that about doubled its size, so I don't know exactly what you'd call it except a respectable dump. I went in the front and let my glasses unsteam, then looked around a little and saw a row of old-fashioned doorbell buttons mounted near the entrance with numbers next to them and names written on a single large card. The name for number eight had been whited out and written over as L. Clarke, and when I couldn't find a Harnisch anywhere on the card, I decided that L. Clarke was as good a person to start with as any, if he was in, so I gave button number eight a push, and after about a minute another push.

"Who is it?" came a voice from beyond a pair of locked narrow doors, only it wasn't the voice of a he, but a *she*.

"Are you L. Clarke?" I said as I stepped closer. "I'm looking for Jason Harnisch who used to have your apartment."

"Are you police?"

"Nope."

A latch snapped, then one of the doors drew back and a round-faced, blond, female head appeared in the opening, followed by a plumpish female body, on the short side, dressed in gray sweats. I wasn't good at guessing ages, but she looked to be in her early twenties.

"Wow—you're tall," she said.

At six foot six and a half, it was something I couldn't deny, so I just said, "Yep. Are you L. Clarke?"

"Yep," she said back in a mocking way. "L for Liz. Who are you?"

"Steve Carr. Could I ask you some things about Jason Harnisch?"

"You're definitely not a cop, so—sure. Is he really dead?"

"What?"

The truth is, I almost said *Who*? But in the last nanosecond I

realized that she was referring to Harnisch, and in another nanosecond my brain kicked in with the equation $\text{STUD GUN} \times \text{DEPRESSED EMOTIONS} = \text{SUICIDE}$. Not exactly a pleasing piece of math. Plus, the girl's expression as she watched me was hard to read, almost excited by the fact that I was staring at her without a clue.

"It's a rumor, that's all," she said, stepping out into the foyer. "Who are you, anyway?"

Here at least was a question I'd come prepared for. "Steve Carr. A friend of mine in Chicago e-mailed me last night that this other friend of his named Jason was acting weird, phone's disconnected and some other stuff, and so here I am checking it out—I hope not too late. Does this rumor have any details?"

"Read for yourself." She pointed a finger at a homemade sign on the wall opposite the doorbells:

INVITATION TO A CAR FIRE

11:00 PM FRIDAY JAN. 8, 1999

ONE PERFORMANCE ONLY

ORCHARD ROAD WEST OF KANE, NORTH SIDE

COME ONE COME ALL (BUT YOU ESPECIALLY, KIRSTEN!)

FOR THE BLAZING FIRST EVENT OF THE LAST OF MILLENNIUM YEAR

BROUGHT TO YOU COURTESY OF

YOUR FORMER FELLOW TENANT

WHO MAKES HIS BRIEF FAREWELL APPEARANCE IN THIS LOCALE

I read the sign through twice and then untacked it from the wall, probably just to show the girl I could be decisive. "Mind if I take this?"

"Go ahead. He shoved a copy under practically everyone's door."

I folded it and put it in my coat pocket, then asked, "Do you know Jason at all—I mean, did you, while he lived here?"

"Uh-huh. I used to be in number eleven, but when he got tossed out I laid a claim. Eight's a lot larger."

She had a different expression on her face now, sort of calculated and curious. I was your original novice detective, but I'd heard the Master's voice two million times on the subject of questioning people, and one thing I remembered him saying was, "Some people want to tell you things just because you show up. A lot of times it's only about them, but you never know if you don't listen."

Except while I stood there dreaming up a conversational gam-

bit, Liz Clarke made one of her own. "Don't you even want to know if there was a car fire?"

"You mean there wasn't? I sort of took it for granted. And besides . . . I heard someone talking about it on campus, only I didn't make the connection." *A judicious lie goes a long way*—more words from the Master.

"Really? Wow!" She shook her head. "Say, listen, why don't you come up for a minute." Then she whispered, "A busybody's coming down the hall behind me. You're Steve, right?"

"Steve Carr."

So I followed her in and up a sagging staircase after being introduced on the fly as her friend Steve, and thirty seconds later we were passing through a kitchen with an old porcelain sink and a stove that smelled of gas. "I'm no corrupter of youth, honest," she giggled to me over her shoulder. "Just an apple-cheeked Appleton maid who likes beer for breakfast."

Beyond the kitchen was a small sitting room and we landed there, but she bounced up as soon as she'd plopped down, saying, "Scat, cat," as she shooed a kitten past me through a door three quarters closed. "Bedroom. Avert your eyes—it's a mess." She pulled the door to and turned with an embarrassed look. "So there goes my image as a woman of the world. Hard to keep up anyway when you teach preschool. How about some coffee?"

"None for me, thanks. But as long as I'm here, an answer or two would be good. You didn't happen to go to that car fire, did you? And who's Kirsten?"

She sat down again before saying, "Kirsten . . . is a kind of a witch, I think. Rhymes with bitch—but we mustn't be like that stupid cat." A feline noise came from her as she grinned across toward the bedroom door. "Kirsten occupies number twelve up yonder. A man magnet. If she could bottle it and sell it, she'd make millions and I'd be her first customer. The trouble is—meow, meow—she just wants to be 'friends' and she can't understand it when the guys get the wrong idea."

"Jason Harnisch?"

"Yep—just one of the guys. Kirsten works in the office at the park district and picks up extra money as a scorekeeper for the over-twenty basketball league. Well, one night last fall, just after the league started up, the regular timekeeper wasn't going to make it, and Kirsten hates doing double duty. How do I know? I've been her sucker a couple of times myself. But this time she cornered Jason with that sweet, innocent smile, then goofed around with him between games and went for pizza and beer and necked a little with him in the hall outside her apartment."

when they got back. I was in eleven then, and sound gets sort of trapped back there." She sighed. "And that was all for poor Jason."

"Jason didn't see it that way, though."

"How very true, Steve Carr. You have the makings of a detective."

"And the fire?"

"Oh, it happened, all right, and I was there. Kirsten would have gone too, just out of curiosity, if she hadn't been committed to a friend's party. It's January and it's Appleton, remember, so a car fire advertised in advance is almost as good as free beer." She stared away toward the bedroom. "Well, anyhow, there were three of us in my car, and we drove out on Kane Road wondering, you know, what kind of mischief Jason really had planned. Nobody'd seen him around here—not officially—since December first when he was booted for nonpayment, and I know he went to Chicago for Christmas to stay with relatives. I also know he sneaked up one last time just before he left, poor sucker, and cried real tears talking to Kirsten, and she was so, so sympathetic about telling him to get over it. To her that sort of thing happens all the time."

"The fire—when you turn off Kane onto Orchard Road, what you see is a big open shoulder that angles up a hill, and that's where the fire was. It was only five to eleven when we got there, but Jason's car was already backed in, up away from the road, shooting flames about twenty feet into the air. And it wasn't fun, actually. It was scary."

"There were two or three cars there ahead of us and people standing around, but nobody wanted to go very close. We got out to watch, and pretty soon everyone started looking around asking, 'Where's Jason? Where's Jason?' More cars pulled up, and then there were sirens and police cars and fire engines, and after a few minutes some cops came over and told us to leave—didn't even ask questions, but we'd all decided not to rat on Jason anyway."

"Only . . . I'd been talking to a couple of people who'd gotten there early, before the car was burning that bad, and they *swore*, Steve, that they'd seen a body in it stuck behind the wheel! And—and so that's why I'm wondering if Jason isn't dead."

Whew! By this time I personally, Steve Carr, was feeling pretty grim—a day late and a dollar short. Plus the thing had turned ugly. Looking grim too, I guess, since Liz suddenly stood up saying "Hey!" and waved a hand in front of my face. "You okay? Honestly? Let's . . . let's go into the kitchen. I still need to have breakfast. I was joking about the beer." She waved me ahead of her and then paused at a desk to take something from a drawer before coming on behind.

"I've got a coffee cake, and I'm not going to eat alone, so what's your pleasure—coffee, tea, or milk?"

"Well, I'd take milk, with thanks, Ms. Clarke."

"Liz to you. You're awfully tall and green, Steve, not that I'm fire engine red." She came close to me then and said in a serious tone, "You wanted to know about Jason, so here's something I found in the desk after I moved in. It's made me think." I took the piece of paper she held out and saw that it was a print of an e-mail to Jason dated September 18, 1998.

Jason

I cant defend you any more with your stepfather and that phone call was an insult to me to. Yes you are 21 now and Gary says alright if you want to be on your own for good don't bother to apologize its too late. God why are you so bad. Gary says if the tuition check hadn't cleared he would have put a stop payment but at least nothing more now so thats it I agree. No more for rent or food or beer or girls. Or next semester tuition. Try your father. Ha. Ha. And keep quiet to the Lindners or I won't speak to you anymore either. I'm very mad.

Your mother

"Explains things some, doesn't it?" Liz Clarke said quietly as soon as I looked up.

"Uh-huh. Except . . . I don't know. How does hard luck translate into car fires? You know him—I'm taking the view that he's still around, you see. What kind of a guy is he, except maybe a smart-ass and a loser?"

She frowned but only said, "Breakfast first." We sat at a table and dug into big slabs of a cinnamon coffee cake, and after a minute she asked, "You play basketball over at Lawrence?"

"Yep. On the J.V. team this year, but next year I'll start on Varsity, knock on wood. Everyone over six three is graduating. You really teach preschool? Do you like it?"

"Yep—excepting the pay. Four years at UW—Green Bay and now eight-fifty an hour. What's your major?"

"Oh—chronic indecision, more or less. Do you know Jason's major, by chance?"

"Psychology, I think."

"That figures. Screwed-up types are always psych majors. What else about Jason?"

"He's a nice guy, first of all. I wish you wouldn't say things like 'screwed up,' even if they're true, okay? Not that I knew him that

well. Last fall he was this big, sad puppy-dog type who wanted everyone to like him. But some people—this is observation, not experience—they're never happy unless they're on the outs emotionally. Preschool psychology.

"So what are you going to do now, Steve?"

"Head back to the dorm, I guess. I wish I knew if there really was a body in that car."

She glanced up at a wall clock that read 9:58. "You know, there's local news on WAPL at ten, I think. Maybe we can hear something."

She hurried to turn on a radio, and after some commercials a voice announced: "The Appleton News Break—all local, all important. Hi, I'm Bob Borowsky. The big story of the last twenty-four hours in Appleton has been the discovery by firemen of the charred remains of an unidentified male body in a car set ablaze late last night on Orchard Road. Police are trying today to trace the owner of the vehicle and . . . just a minute, please. My producer Jan Harms has just handed me a fresh briefing from Appleton Police Headquarters. Let's see. The . . . uh . . . all right, here we are: The body found in the vehicle, it says, quote, 'though burned beyond recognition, had a large construction nail driven into its head.' . . . My God! (A pause.) Well, that's how the briefing reads, ladies and gentlemen. So, uh, please stay tuned to WAPL-FM for future developments."

Liz Clarke switched off the radio, then turned to stare at me. I may have looked as green as I felt, but I decided not to mention the stud gun to her.

"That doesn't sound good," she said. "I mean, it sounds really . . . bad."

"To me, it sounds pretty much like suicide or murder, to be honest, and Jason really is dead or he's in for it. He didn't hold a grudge for any guys that you know about, did he?"

She shook her head, looking stunned.

"Well, in any case, I think I'd better go." I slipped back into the sitting room for my coat and saw the door to the bedroom cracked open again with the kitten peeking out curiously.

"Why, that stupid cat!" Liz exclaimed as she pushed past me to close the door. "The latch sticks sometimes, but how can that little thing make it come open?"

"Maybe it's the ghost of Jason Harnisch," I said half under my breath.

"Jason is—or was—a nice guy, Steve. Honestly. Things must have just gotten to him."

"I'd say definitely. Well—good-bye."



When I got out by the street, I stood for a few seconds to reorient while I put on my hat and gloves. The snowfall had stopped, but the walks were still ice packed, and the only thing Liz's coffee cake had done was whet my appetite. I finally started off, but I hadn't gone ten steps when a car slid past me to a slippery stop and sounded its horn. I kept on moving because I didn't think the driver could possibly want my attention, but a few seconds later I heard a voice yell, "Mr. Carr? Is that you?"

When I turned I caught sight of—stumbling through the snow after me—was what I hadn't seen in Liz Clarke's apartment: a girl who looked genuinely sick with worry.

"Gosh! You're not—"

We stared at each other for a moment. The view from my side showed a cute girl with long hair the color of dark honey. She seemed about ready to cry, never mind the fact that she smelled like cigarettes from five feet off.

"Are you Kirsten?" I asked.

"Who?" She came even closer. "You're not Mr. Carr. I see that. All right. Are you—that is, R. J. Carr, the detective—are you his son?"

"Well, yeah." I was probably staring. "We look sort of alike, but how—? Are you his client on the Jason Harnisch case?"

"Me? I would be if I—I'm Jason's cousin and . . ." She started crying all at once there on the sidewalk, and I said, "Don't! It's not all bad, I don't think. Or not necessarily." Lying, probably. "And Dad's coming this afternoon."

I took a look back at the building I'd just left, then said, "You don't want to go in there, though. Maybe we should sit in your car, or find some food or something."

Five minutes later I was pretty much gagging in the smoky interior of Cathy Lindner's Cherokee as we drove off looking for a real breakfast, but at least we'd undone some confusion. She told me what she knew and why she'd gotten up at four thirty this morning to drive to Appleton, and I explained a few things and held a few others back in order not to worry her even more. Not, at least, until I'd checked in with Dad.

It's a mistake to theorize on insufficient data—Rule Number One of the Master. And I didn't have much data that morning. If I had anything, it was a hunch.

GINNY CARR:

At twenty minutes to four that Saturday afternoon I left R. J.'s Chevy parked in front of 1722 Martin and traversed ice, snow, and then shoveled cement walk to the entrance of the building,

a former rooming house enlarged and converted into cheap apartments. The late afternoon sky overhead was heavy with lowering clouds, but the bleak-looking vestibule inside the building seemed even darker as I entered, lit by a single 40-watt bulb high on a wall.

In its dim glow, nevertheless, I was able to find the name Kirsten Postlewaite listed on a large hand-printed card. Then I pressed the bell button for apartment twelve. While I waited with neither hope nor expectation that the young woman might be home at that hour, I reviewed the events and revelations of what had been a rather grim day.

First, R. J.'s failed in-person confrontation with a manager at Berkham Truck Rentals over the subject of Jason Harnisch's summary dismissal from employment. Next, our drive north from Elm Grove, slowed by heavy traffic in Milwaukee and occasional snow from south of Fond du Lac into Appleton, punctuated as well by a horrible fast-food lunch near Osh Kosh. Then our arrival at our son Steve's dormitory and the multiple revelations, beginning with the surprise presence at his side of Jason's cousin, Cathy Lindner; continuing by way of Steve's account of the bizarrely staged and advertised car fire; and concluding in the young woman's temporary absence, with a more detailed report of what Steve had actually found out—facts, events, opinions, and personalities—during his morning interview with the third young woman in the affair, Liz Clarke.

Finally, our leaving Cathy in Steve's benign company, my dropping R. J. at the Appleton police station to garner whatever information he could concerning the body found in Jason's burned-out car, and my problematical attempt at interrogating the last unknown character of any consequence in the affair, save Jason Harnisch himself.

Yet, even given Steve's half flippant inquiry—"So which is worse? Suicide or murder?"—all three Carrs, father, mother, and son, viewed with distrust the appearance of horrific tragedy in the events thus far. Something—the tone, perhaps—was wrong. *Mischief* still seemed the operative term. There was a staginess to the proceedings that belied their bleakness, and if Steve was to be believed, the third young woman, Liz Clarke, seemed to share our skepticism.

Just after touching the bell button a second time I heard approaching footsteps, and a few seconds thereafter not the anticipated young woman but a young man stepped out into the vestibule. He and I examined each other beneath the 40-watt bulb, his view being that of a woman two months short of fifty, of

average height with black hair, dressed seasonably in corduroy slacks, heavy boots, and a down-lined coat. My prospect, in contrast, was that of a well-formed, college-age youth, shaved bald and beardless except for a straggling mustache, fairly tall, and dressed also for the outdoors in high-top boots, insulated pants, and a long coat with a parka top folded down.

"You're looking for Kirsten?" he asked.

"Yes. Kirsten Postlewaite."

"She sent me down—" He rolled his eyes slightly in an uncertain way. "—sort of to check up first. She's not feeling well, and there's . . . a little trouble going around."

"Concerning Jason Harnisch? That's why I'm here, I'm afraid."

"Oh. Well."

"I have just a few questions to ask. I'm one of the guidance counselors, and there's some concern on campus, as you may imagine, about what's been happening. The rumors—"

"The rumors?" He made the same uncertain ocular movement. "I guess. She's sick, but maybe you could come up. Sure. She might say no, but—"

I followed the young man along an interior hall and up two long flights of dimly lit stairs. "She's at the back," he mouthed over his shoulder, and when I drew alongside him at the end of the top floor hall, he turned with a foolish grin on his face and said, "You're not one of the counselors, you know. They're all ugly and stupid looking."

In his hand was a small pistol almost like a starter's gun, but with the sharp point of a heavy nail protruding from its barrel. "Let's go inside."

My feelings at this precise moment were a complex mingling, of which fear constituted the smallest and least relevant part. I felt relief primarily—for the young man surely was Jason himself and no other, notwithstanding his shaved and glistening skull, and therefore he wasn't a suicide but an ongoing player in his own game, whatever that might be. As to the question of his being a murderer, I had no opinion, but I was hoping to form one shortly.

My next strongest feeling—paradoxically, perhaps, considering the grotesque firearm pointed at my abdomen—was compassion, both for the young man and the others concerned, especially his cousin Cathy Lindner, whom I liked very much upon meeting, if for no reason other than her intrepid response to Jason's erratic behavior. The depth of my compassion for the unknown, Kirsten, in contrast, depended almost entirely upon what I found after passing through her apartment doorway, which I did in silence, eyeing the young man and being eyed in return.

The apartment consisted of two "rooms" joined at an arch, a kitchen-dining area to the left and a living area to the right, with two chairs, a table, and a large futon doubling as a sofa. A bathroom opened off the kitchen, and I ascertained immediately that the young woman wasn't anywhere in the apartment.

"She's not here," the young man admitted. "Even the cat's gone. And so I'm waiting. Lurking. Skulking."

"You're Jason, of course."

"Possibly. Who are you? Possibly."

"I . . . The truth is I *am* a school guidance counselor. And although I don't counsel at Lawrence, there is concern about you there. My name is Virginia Carr. My husband is a private investigator who was hired by Swenson Equipment Rental to recover the stud gun you have in your hand prior to your doing anything with it that you might regret. In that regard he's far too late, of course, but if you were to give it to me voluntarily—"

"No!" The virulence of his response was superseded almost instantaneously by another rolling of his eyes. "Kirsten first. Where is he? Your husband?"

"I'm not sure," I lied. "He dropped me here." Another lie. "That is, a student on campus, never mind the name, gave us several possible leads and I volunteered to question Kirsten because that's rather in my line. How did you break into her apartment?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"True enough, why should you?" After observing him for a moment I said, "May I?" Whereupon I ventured to remove my coat and sit on a chair at the dining table. Then I placed my purse and the coat on the table and continued, "It's my understanding that you're almost destitute, Jason. It may be none of my business again, but—"

"I've got seven dollars left and a pocket full of change, not that it is your business. I've maxed out two credit cards, I owe two months rent here, and the phone company's collection department would very much like a corrected mailing address. If one existed."

"Then you've been living in your car?"

"No."

"Thank goodness for that, considering—"

"Considering. You are so right." He removed his coat but remained standing with the stud gun pointed at me. "It was a junker anyway, and I couldn't afford new plates. Plus the insurance runs out in three weeks. Money makes the world go round."

"I—I heard that you stayed with relatives over the Christmas break, but before that—"

"A guilt-stricken friend, nameless and fameless, helped me hide right in this building, right under the nose of Downtown Management Company, God bless its corporate soul." He rolled his eyes shamefacedly, as he had not for a while. "It was strictly a favor to get me through finals. So I've made my own bed, sleeping down by the boiler with the mice. You think I'm kidding."

"No. But—" I laid my purse flat, then opened it and peered inside. "I know for a fact that you have other friends, Jason. And if money is the only difficulty, my husband and I would—"

"Stop! I don't know you. I don't want charity. I just don't..." His eyes panned wildly around the room before focusing on my face again. "No more talk, okay? I'm through with talking. When I wanted to talk, everybody blew me off, so let's not say anything. I won't bother you, if you won't bother me, and oh, what a quiet, pleasant place this place will always be. And that way you'll also be safe. Probably." He gestured with the pistol. "I make no guarantees."

My gaze followed his to Kirsten's apartment door, and only then did I notice the ominous nailpoints, four of them, protruding like spikes from the opposite side.

"Cathy Lindner—"

"Shut up!" The pain in his face matched the anguish in his voice, and so I relented. Instead I checked the interior of my purse again to make absolutely certain that the handle of the target pistol was as I wished, then I sat back in the chair and looked at my watch, wondering how much longer it might be before R. J. came hunting for me. Or the girl Kirsten decided to come back. Or something else happened.

In any event, my only logical recourse was to wait. As my husband might have said, had he been present, When you don't know what to do, don't do anything.

STEVE CARR:

Well—it was a minute after five that the telephone rang, and to be honest, it wasn't a minute too soon. Seven hours with Cathy Lindner, mostly spent by both of us trying to keep up a hopeful pose, was taking its toll, more on her than me since she was the real sufferer, not only being so anxious about her cousin, but also trying to step outside for as few cigarettes as possible as a gesture to me.

I learned a lot about her in those seven hours: She was twenty-two; she was of German and Norwegian descent; she was a late, only child, a Lutheran, a full partner in the family construction business with her father and mother; she was the company's unlicensed practical architect. Not currently going out with anyone,

not currently having much fun, not seeing much of her old high school and community college friends, not making new ones. Exasperated by Jason, worried to death by Jason, full of guilt about her recent treatment of Jason, hurt pretty deeply by Jason's earlier blasé treatment of her. Confused by Jason.

By the time the phone rang I was basically fed up with hearing about it all, since it was hard for me to find points of empathy. I got along fine with my own sister, for instance, if Jason was like a brother to her. And the girl I was secretly holding out for was just that, a secret, so if Cathy loved Jason in more than a sisterly way, I wasn't about to exchange confidences.

"Hello?"

"Steve—it's Dad. Your mother isn't there, is she?"

"No. Didn't she—"

"She dropped me at the police station and went over to Martin Street to try to question the other girl. She was going to be back here by four fifteen. I think . . . the body in the car definitely wasn't Harnisch's, first of all, so I think—"

"He's got her!"

"Well—I think we need to get to Martin Street anyway, both of us. Can you borrow Cathy's car? Or, no—she'd better come too."

The one thing you should never ever do is panic. The case was turning into a proving ground of all of Dad's professional wisdom, it seemed like, and the reasoned calm in his voice made me think of this favorite axiom as I tried to hold down my sudden fear. "We'll be there in ten minutes," I said.

I tossed Cathy her coat from where it lay across the back of my desk chair, then explained what had happened, as much as I knew, while I hustled her ahead of me out to her Cherokee. After that we sped along the dark streets, Cathy driving and puffing at a cigarette with the window wide open while I told her about the charred body in the car fire and the nail in its head. She didn't have to be shielded from that particular uncertainty anymore, since Jason was alive.

Or alive, at least, until I got my hands on him if he'd done anything to Mom—that's what I was thinking privately.

At the police station, Dad climbed in the seat behind us saying, "Let's go," and Cathy burned rubber pulling out into traffic. She was upset but being very quiet. It wasn't far to Martin Street, and when we got there Dad's Chevy was sitting right in front, so he and I got out while Cathy parked farther up the block. Then Dad stepped back to the trunk of the car and dug around in the dark for a minute; he'd only just pocketed the pistol he kept hidden there as Cathy came hurrying up beside us. From there we waded

snow on up to the building entrance, with Dad in charge all the way. While panic was as far from his manner as hilarity, he was what you might call intent on the job. "Follow my lead, you two," was all he said, "and be quiet."

In the foyer he didn't even look at the bell buttons but went straight to the locked double doors, where he kneeled down with a little pocket tool out. It wasn't fifteen seconds until I heard the latch snap open. "The girl you talked to, Steve—lead the way."

At the door to Liz Clarke's apartment Dad knocked, then stood back and said to me, "Get her to open the door." How he knew she'd be there I didn't figure out until a few seconds later, just about the time I heard Liz's voice saying from a distance, "Who is it?"

"Steve Carr. I was here this morning, remember? I need to ask you a couple of things."

"Oh. Just a sec." There were various muted sounds, then the door drew in enough for Liz to poke her head through. That was when Dad crashed it wide open and stepped past her, saying, "Ms. Clarke, I'm Steve's father. The young lady there is Jason's cousin Cathy. We need to talk to Kirsten right now, so if you won't bring her out, I'll have to."

Liz was dressed in slacks and a sweater this time and had make-up on, which made her look older, maybe late twenties. I felt young and a little stupid, having guessed dead wrong about who she was hiding in the bedroom. It was Kirsten—not Jason, the way I'd theorized. Anyway, before Liz could answer, a girl in a fatigue-print jumpsuit stepped through the doorway to the sitting room holding the kitten against her with one arm and gripping a beer bottle in the opposite hand.

I'd stepped to the side when we barged in, so I could see the look Cathy Lindner gave her as she approached and the look she gave back. The two of them didn't look that much alike—Kirsten was taller and older and had dark hair and eyes—but each one held herself the same, and they had similar faces and expressions, or they did when Cathy wasn't staring Kirsten down.

"Well?" Kirsten addressed Dad in a tone that sounded to me more than slightly buzzed.

"Why are you hiding out?"

"I'm scared." She raised the kitten up and kissed its head. "We're scared, aren't we, Tig?"

"Why?"

I stepped close and grabbed the cat away. "Look. It's important. Someone else is in danger besides you."

"Oh." She fell back a step. "I... well, I... came in late, like, you know, last night? And there were, like, these nails pounded

through my door, and I thought, omigod, Jason's pissed because I didn't go to his stupid car fire! And so I grabbed the cat and ran down here to good old Liz—"

"The good old sucker," muttered Liz.

"Then you haven't actually seen Jason?" Dad asked.

"I've heard him!"

"She'd been listening at the door," Liz said in a dubious tone.

"I know how he walks, and I've heard him! He went down the stairs and back up—so he's up there!" She pointed upward toward the back of the building. "He's got a passkey. You know he does!"

"Then why, for God's sake, haven't you called the police?" Dad asked.

"Liz won't let me."

"No one's going to rat on poor Jason," announced Liz, "not around me."

Dad looked coldly from Liz back to Kirsten, then said, "Well, now you're both going upstairs. We're all going. He's holding a hostage in your room, you see, until you come back."

"But—"

"He won't hurt you!" Cathy proclaimed suddenly. "It's me he really wants to hurt, and since I'm here now . . ."

It was an interesting procession once we got going, anyway, with Dad in the lead telling Kirsten what she had to do, followed by Liz, then Cathy, then myself as backstop. Along the third floor hallway we went slowly and in dead quiet. Dad made Kirsten rattle the door a little and then say, "Where's that key?" before she unlocked it, but he was the one through first, straight at the danger, as usual, with his eyes wide open, shielding everyone else.

For various reasons, I couldn't see things from where I stood, but the scenario was described to me like this: Mom was sitting calmly at a kitchen table a few feet in and to the left, while Jason stood to the right and farther back with the stud gun pointed at her, only he looked different from what everyone expected because he'd shaved his head and beard and dropped the earring. The three girls crowded in after Dad, but when Jason saw Kirsten peeking out and then Cathy standing openly to one side, he did what I think of as the inevitable but unpredictable thing, as if he'd been waiting there the whole afternoon, going through all the permutations in his head until he found the single workable response. He raised the nail point sticking out of the stud gun and braced it against his right temple.

The revolver Dad had halfway drawn was useless against that particular move. Even Mom's deadeye marksmanship, now that she could pull out her target pistol, was useless too; the angle

made it impossible for her to shoot away the gun and not kill Jason.

"Jason, no!" I heard Cathy cry. *"Please! I'm sorry!"*

Cathy's presence must have been what threw Jason off. He knew Dad was coming eventually because Mom had told him so; he was expecting Kirsten; Liz was a familiar friend, the one who'd hidden him out secretly through his last finals, I found out later.

But when he saw his cousin there, crying and crying out, he was up against an eventuality he hadn't considered and wasn't prepared for. So all at once there were tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice. "I've . . . you just stay back, Cath. I've already done this to one person."

"But the person was already cold and dead," Dad responded. "For days. And you're not."

Mom and Dad exchanged a quick, communicative look and Dad nodded. "Berkham's. Right."

None of the rest of us understood, except possibly Cathy, but no explanation came because things started happening too fast.

"Oh, Jason! Why don't you stop whining and grow up!" Kirsten said in a whiny tone from behind Dad's shoulder.

Jason tried to answer her, speaking through Dad: "You don't need to hide, Kirsten. Honestly. This was never for you. I just wanted you to pay attention! I wanted someone to pay attention! So now . . . you're all paying attention!"

"Don't!"

"No!"

Liz and Cathy seemed to shout together before Cathy stepped much nearer and Jason ordered, "Stay Back, Cath! I mean it!"

"Shoot me, then, Jason, if you have to, but don't shoot anyone—that's best! Nothing's that bad if you didn't—"

"Get away, I said! And—and everyone, all of you, move! Over by Mrs. Carr! Do you understand! All of you!"

So then came a mass shuffling toward Mom, with more cries and protests, followed by Jason circling around toward the still open apartment door with the weird pistol held up to his head. "Mr. and Mrs. Carr?" he said finally. "I'm sorry for all the trouble. I really am. Liz? You're a good friend. Cathy—Cathy, I love you. Honestly." A long pause. "You're the last, I guess, Kirsten. And you can go straight to hell for all I care now."

Only as he stood there making farewell speeches with his back to the open door, I slipped up behind him from outside in the hall—I was the backstop, remember—and sort of slapped the gun away from his head. It flew off and bounced around without firing, and I had Jason's arms pinned before he could even respond.

And so that's pretty much how Steve Carr turned out not to be an entire flop in his first real detective case—brawn far more than brain.

Dad has fudged quite a few cases over the years to keep what Mom calls "the innocent guilty" from facing authority, but mostly when no serious harm was done. In this affair, the car fire alone was serious enough, not just mischief, and so we four, Dad, Mom, Cathy Lindner, and I, escorted Jason to the Appleton police station, where he turned himself in, basically in a state of shock but looking relieved. Cathy promised to post bail as soon as it could be managed, and seeing the two of them say good-bye in front of a bunch of strangers made me decide I didn't know enough about the ins and outs of human feelings.

After that we had dinner in a good but noisy restaurant, then the folks and Cathy checked into a motel with me tagging along, and finally, at about nine that night, we all got together for the full explanation which, as usual, only Dad knew.

"The crucial point, Steve," he began, addressing me because I was being a little querulous about the delay, "was the point we didn't know. Jason all of a sudden called up Cathy at work on Monday morning and announced that he was coming back up here to hunt for a job. All right, fine. But why? He and Cathy were—"

"We weren't really speaking," she said. "I was mad at him and he was mad at me, and we both felt guilty about . . . various things. It was mostly my fault, though, because I never gave him a chance. I was so hard on him, I'm ashamed. I wanted him to hurt a little, the way I had, before we made friends again."

"Yes," said Mom. "Except that, in his state of crisis he took it as absolute rejection."

"Anyway," I grumbled, "somehow he hatched a crazy plot. So what is this mysterious point I still don't know?"

"It's *why* he was fired summarily on Sunday night from his job at Berkham Truck Rentals. He wasn't scheduled to work Friday or Saturday—or Sunday either—but he was called in unexpectedly that last morning. It wasn't to do his usual work, which was cleaning vehicles overnight."

Mom took over then: "It was a holiday weekend, you see, and there had also been that horrible storm. So not many trucks were under lease, but breakdowns among those on the road were doubtless far more numerous statistically and probably more difficult to confront with an understaffed holiday crew. That much was evident."

"And so," Dad picked up, "our guess was that Jason had been called to go out as a helper on some kind of emergency roadside service. Since I knew that the motto of the company was 'We Specialize,' I was expecting something a little different when I drove over there this morning, but I honestly didn't see anything that gave me a clue. Lots of vehicles geared to specific use, sure, but nothing that connected to the problem.

"When I asked about Jason, though, the manager on duty practically shouted me out of the place. I yelled back that by not opening up he might just be allowing a crime to be committed, and he said that if one did happen he wasn't responsible—and only if it did would he talk to the police. A real nice fellow, and logical too."

"So you came up here still not knowing why Jason was axed."

"The official explanation was 'carelessness,' but consider the time sequence. He and Cathy had argued and weren't speaking all Friday and Saturday; he was called in for emergency work Sunday morning and got back to the Lindner house in the middle of the night. At ten or so on Monday morning he rented the stud gun, putting up two hundred dollars in cash; an hour later he called Cathy to say he was heading up here. Late Thursday and again Friday morning he tried to call Cathy collect, meaning he was out of money and desperate to talk. Friday afternoon he posted the announcement about the car fire—"

"And consider also, Steve," Mom interrupted, "the rather forlorn, self-pitying humor of the wording. When you asked this afternoon which was worse, suicide or murder, we all were thinking—or I was—that murder was the greater *worry* at least, but in fact the young man I spent a silent hour with later was being consumed by despair, not guilt."

At that statement she gave me one of her patented penetrating looks, and a shift occurred in my mental perspective. "You don't mean to say he robbed a grave, do you? And brought the corpse with him to Appleton?"

Dad said, "Close enough. When I went in to see the police, the autopsy had just been completed, and it found that the body in the car had been dead for at least eight days and frozen solid for part of that time, meaning, for one thing, that Jason hadn't murdered him, and the nail in the forehead was simply more window dressing *à la* Harnisch. The true cause of death was heart failure, and even though it was charred on the outside, the corpse had the physical characteristics of a man in poor health around seventy years old."

Mom said, "No doubt, your father immediately placed a call to Berkham Truck Rentals and, with the backing of the Appleton

police, forced the true story out of the recalcitrant shift manager. But as yet he hasn't divulged that truth even to his wife."

"Nope. A single retelling is all I can face. Everybody ready? Berkham, it seems, has a contract with a consortium of Midwestern medical schools to transport bodies, some left by will to science, some collected for a nominal sum from small-town communities without funds or willingness to bury derelicts and paupers, some from sources the guy wouldn't identify. They even have a special refrigerated truck for that purpose with *bays*, I think the guy said, to carry up to eight stiff at a crack.

"Anyway, the blizzard held up a run out south and west in Illinois from Thursday on, and the driver seems to have spent his time stranded in Moline getting oiled. Sunday morning early, after the roads opened again, he started off with a hangover toward Chicago coming in on I-88. Going over the Rock River bridge, he hit a patch of ice. The truck went into a skid, plowed off the road and down an embankment, rammed a tree, and dumped four dead bodies and one live one out into the snow. The driver ended up in the hospital with a drunk driving citation, the vehicle was more or less demolished, and Berkham Truck Rentals had a major crisis on its hands with none of its regular people available to help."

"Poor Jason," Cathy said.

"Right. He drove out there behind the shift manager in a normal refrigerated truck, and together they loaded the bodies into the rear. Then the shift manager buzzed off back to Chicago as fast as he could and left your cousin to deal with bringing the bodies in at a safe, slow pace. That's all we know for sure, except that Jason showed up very late with one of the back doors of the truck flapping open and only three bodies in the truck.

"So—carelessness. Jason apparently just fumbled around and acted defensive and hostile, and the night manager blew up and paid him off out of petty cash."

"He was out of his mind," I said, referring to Jason.

"Rather he was confused and depressed and at the end of his tether, don't you think?" Mom has a definite way of putting people like me in our places when we say stupid things. "His parents had virtually disowned him, remember. His one confirmed emotional anchor wasn't speaking to him. The girl he had a crush on here in Appleton didn't return his interest. His college goals seemed unattainable after seven semesters. He was out of money and wasn't thinking rationally—"

"And he'd just spent several hours first wrestling frozen stiff up a snowy embankment into a truck and then driving two hundred miles with them as his only company," Dad added.

"Yes. It's hardly difficult to see how he might come to have morbid or desperate ideas, such as staging a car fire. As he informed me this afternoon, his car insurance and license plates were expiring and he had no money to renew. What he said to Kirsten in all of our hearing is the key, I think. He needed attention. He just wanted people to pay attention to him."

"Poor Jason," Cathy said again. "Poor dumb, crazy mutt."

Some final observations by your novice in crime:

Didn't the whole affair seem a little melodramatic? After the fact, absolutely. While it was going on, though, it was dead serious.

Would Jason actually have pulled the trigger when he held the stud gun to his head? Maybe not, since it seemed just as likely that he was ready to cut and run.

Was I glad I put the matter out of doubt? Yep.

Did he do jail time for all the mischief he caused? Ninety days in Wisconsin, suspended sentence in Illinois, approximately a million years of community service and big bucks in fines, which his parents refused to pay, so the Lindners did.

What about Liz Clarke? She stopped being a sucker for Kirsten and got on with her life.

Kirsten? Went on being Kirsten. That type always does.

Did Jason and Cathy iron out their differences? Well . . .

The second year after I graduated, winter of '03, I was home in Chicago working at a brand-new occupation, and on my way to an assignment, my route took me past L & L Construction over near O'Hare. For three days I fought it off, but curiosity finally took control, and so I pulled my car up in front of the place and went inside on the fourth morning, not knowing what I was going to find. Probably strangers.

The first thing I noticed was a rather faded, dog-eared sign in lettering I thought I recognized:

**NO SMOKING!!
(THIS MEANS YOU, CATH)**

And the next thing I saw, off behind a counter, was the head and shoulders profile of Cathy Lindner seated at a computer terminal. We Carrs are pretty impossible not to recognize, once seen, so when she looked around I just said, "Hi. How's the head architect?"

She stood up and came toward me before replying, "Slightly, well—" A gesture. "Hello, Steve Carr! I saw your father I don't know how long ago, and he told me you were getting married."

"Got married." I nodded, then took a good look at her left hand

for a reason, since even without the gesture she'd made, I would have caught on that she was possibly seven months pregnant.

"Me too."

I was honestly afraid to ask, so I waited.

"Yes. To Jason. It's legal for third cousins, and not regarded as dangerous, you know. I guess the fact is, I was Jason's big problem—maybe you remember—and when I stopped being a problem for him, he basically stopped being one for himself. And it's great being married to your best friend."

I agreed, then asked, "So what's he up to now—more mischief?"

"Some." She smiled. "Mainly, he's been learning the business from Dad for the past three years. Dad's sixty-eight, you know, so one of these days, very soon I think, we'll have to change the sign out in front from L & L to H & H."

It seemed a good belated ending, at least for what to me was just the beginning—not that Carr Investigations and Security had to change anything about its name when it signed me on. 🐦

Solution to the June "UNSOLVED"

Carl King, the cook, stabbed Andy Judson, the first mate.

MAN	POSITION	SHIRT	PANTS	FOOTWEAR
Andy Judson	first mate	corduroy	leather	sealskin boots
Bart Hull	dog handler	denim	corduroy	overshoes
Carl King	cook	red wool	twill	mocassins
Dan Gant	navigator	cambray	plaid wool	caribou mukluks
Eddie Lawson	captain	buckskin	denim	rubber boots
Frank Ingram	cabin boy	flannel	brown wool	cowhide boots

CAVEAT EMPTOR

The wish first occurred to Judson Wick while he was attending the opera.

An opera box was not his normal milieu, but he could not pass up the chance to escort the elderly widow who glittered with diamonds and influence; so, masking his lack of interest and knowledge, he kept an attentive look on his handsome, if rather bland, face and bent his sleek, dark head in response to the widow's frequent nudges. It was during such a moment, when he did focus on the performance, that the wish occurred to him. He smiled ruefully and dismissed it.

It came back to him the next day, during his yearly lunch with the manager of Wick Industries. The man always recited lists of figures—this year they showed the declining value of the company's stock—and reminisced at irritating length about the years when Judson's father had built and run the company. It was Judson's practice to keep his manner aloof and unconcerned; but this time, when the manager made pointed references to "the leisurely life," the manner began to show fine cracks, like battered safety glass—until the moment was saved by the sudden return of the wish.

That evening it returned once more when, as a guest of the director, Judson attended the opening of a Broadway play and the party that followed. He ate smoked oysters and listened while the rave reviews were read aloud; over the rim of his champagne glass he watched the director, with whom he had gone to school, standing in the spotlight of success, and the wish came back so forcefully that the champagne soured in his throat and he left the party.

He barely had returned to his apartment when the doorbell rang. His spirits lifted at the thought that the red haired actress had changed her mind about a nightcap, but the person at the door was not female, and the hair was quite gray. The suit was gray too, in both color and spirit, drooping on the man's shoulders and rounding over his knees. Everything about him seemed tired and

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sad except for his tie, a strip of vivid orange silk that ran down his shirtfront like a tongue of flame. "Good evening," he said. "I am advised by my firm that you have some property for sale."

"I think you've got the wrong apartment."

"I think not. You are Judson A. Wick, you are forty-one years old, and you are interested in selling the balance."

"Of what?" asked Judson cautiously.

"Last night you attended Gounod's opera and made a wish, which you have repeated twice. Therefore you are requesting an arrangement similar to Doctor Faust's. May I come in?"

Judson moved aside mechanically while his mind struggled for comprehension. "I think you're putting me on."

"Mr. Wick," sighed the man, "if I were not what I claim to be, how could I have known about your wish?"

"I don't know," said Judson finally. "But you don't look the part. Who ever heard of you as the man in the gray flannel suit?"

"But I am just a salesman, a mere servant of the firm. Call me John, if you like." The man shot his cuffs and smoothed his tie. "This is the twentieth century, Mr. Wick. We are no longer a Middle Ages barter service but a modern business corporation. Naturally we don't ask you to take us on faith. We offer, in fact we insist upon, a twenty-four-hour period in which you sample our merchandise free of charge, with no further obligation. Now, for what did you wish to negotiate? Power? Knowledge? Eternal Youth?" When Judson frowned, he added, "Then there is our most popular offer, Fame and Influence."

"Ah," said Judson. "Yes."

"In which field would you want it?"

Judson shrugged. "I wouldn't care. No, wait a minute." Into his mind bubbled the memory of champagne and rave reviews. "Make it show business. Broadway. No, make it bigger. Hollywood."

The man took out a small, gray pad, made a note, and rose. "When you wake up tomorrow the twenty-four hours will begin. Incidentally, we'll be observing you, to insure that satisfaction is achieved. Then I return at the end of the period, with a contract for you to sign."

Judson's gaze wavered and slid around the room. "All right," he said finally. "What have I got to lose?"

Something flickered for a moment in the man's gray eyes, like matches at the ends of two tunnels. Then the orange tie dimmed out, and he was gone.

When Judson awoke at ten, he heard a voice that seemed to be located in his ear. "Good morning," it said in metallic, asexual

tones. "The observation has begun. We are ready to grant your wishes." After a moment there was an odd sensation inside Judson's head: a faint, not unpleasant, echoing, rather as if someone were listening on a telephone extension. "They mean it," he said softly. "What the hell do you know about that?"

The words made him smile; he lay in bed for some moments grinning, but finally he began to consider what his requests should be. Self-consciously at first, because he was aware of the inner listener, and then with growing pleasure in the fact of an audience, he thought of some of the important film people he had met in the past, during the years when he had been married to Shelley, and she had not yet catapulted to fame. He could, he thought, choose to be like any of them—to be one of those who moved on the edges of the limelight but in the center of power, or even to be an actor, perhaps the top male box office star in the country. Or the world.

The pale green phone on his nightstand rang. In a rather puzzled voice a man introduced himself as a reporter from *Variety*, said he had just heard there was an important story to be gotten from a Judson Wick, and inquired what it might be.

It took all of Judson's skill to convince the man there was a story but that it could not be divulged yet; when he hung up, he was sharply aware that the inner listener was still listening. He got into the shower and made a careful list of people he might call, narrowing it to three, one of whom was his director friend of the night before, but finally rejecting all of them. While he was shaving, the thought that Shelley was in town promoting her latest picture kept pulling at his mind. He nicked his chin, swore, and suddenly laughed aloud: why should he worry about finding an excuse to call? Shelley would call him—if he wished.

When he reached the restaurant two hours later, Shelley was just arriving in a cloud of reporters. He detached her and led her to a table, where he insisted that she talk about her new film throughout their first drink. "All right," she finally said. "I'm the one who called you, God knows why, so I must want to hear what you've been up to all these years."

He took her hand and a deep breath; it seemed to him that the interest of the inner listener had quickened. Picking his way among the words, he said, "I'm on to something big. Very big. Something that's going to lead me straight to your town."

"Something in pictures, you mean?"

"What else do you do in Hollywood?"

"But you don't know anything about the industry."

"Shelley," he said softly, "I'll be able to do anything I want. Anything."

She studied him, her violet eyes narrowing to points of black light. "Are you serious? You're going to produce a picture?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that. Of course. That's what I'm going to do."

"What picture?"

He raised a hand for the waiter, wishing for him to come immediately, and ordered more drinks. Then he leaned back and said carefully, "Let's put it this way. I'm in the market for ideas."

"Are you? That's a coincidence." Shelley tapped her glass slowly with one mauve and perfect nail. "There's a book that Global is planning to buy for Lisa Gordon. But it would be so right for me. If someone else got it, that is. If someone else were able to get it."

"That's a coincidence." He smiled boyishly, the smile she used to say she liked. "Because what I had in mind was to make a great picture for Shelley."

When he returned to his apartment, there were eighteen hours left of the twenty-four. Despite the successful lunch, there was a fist of tension at the back of his neck that would not uncurl. He made a martini and sat staring down at its olive eye. Then he picked up the phone and called the elderly widow whom he had escorted to *Faust*. Adopting the bantering manner she liked, he inquired about the charity ball she was staging, automatically wangled an invitation, and finally extracted the true object of his call, a telephone number.

He dialed it, adjusting his mental posture to one of deference; to the famous film critic who answered, he posed as a graduate student researching the adapting of novels to the screen. He sought the critic's opinion of several recent films, and then casually mentioned the novel Shelley had suggested. When the critic spoke of it enthusiastically, he asked, in a casual, speculative manner, which writers and directors would be most capable of translating such a property to the screen. He hung up with a half smile that could not seem to grow; he sat fingering the back of his neck, and told himself that he needed to get out.

An hour later he headed for an art gallery on Madison Avenue. The crowd at the opening was already so dense that there was no way, or need, to see the paintings; he thrust himself in among the bodies and soon had collected enough comments to deliver them to the artist as if they were his own tribute. Then he was free to turn to the real business of the evening.

Moving among the crowd with studied aimlessness, he talked to a senator's mistress and the president of a Fifth Avenue store, telling them that he was going to make a film; the sudden interest in their eyes became a glint in his own. He told the wives of

three industrialists that Shelley Garnett would be starring in his picture; the warmth in their voices became a cool assurance in his own. He told two art critics of the major literary property he was going to buy and the screenwriter and director he planned to hire; the attentiveness in their manner became a certainty in his own veins.

By nine o'clock the crowd had thinned, but its power was still with him. With the insolence of confidence, he attached himself to the painter and to the man's plans for dinner with a few influential clients.

When he got home at two o'clock, he did not know whether his exultation was the racing of his own pulse or the throbbing attention of the inner listener. He paced the living room in wide, jagged arcs; finally he took a sleeping pill and forced himself to lie on the bed.

Around five o'clock his staring eyes closed, but behind their lids a dream began almost at once: at the end of a flame colored carpet, down which he walked for dozens of triumphant yards, he was greeted by a massive figure in red.

John wiped his face with a gray handkerchief and turned to the last entry in his notebook. He was making his daily report to the gentleman known simply as M, who sat behind a battered desk in an office that had seen better centuries. M wore a gray cape as thin as smoke, and a chronic scowl.

"Merchandise check on Judson A. Wick," John read. "Requested Fame and Influence. Field: none. When pressed, subject chose the film industry, a desire inspired by watching a friend's success. Here is the printout on his mental processes: Settled on becoming a producer, a notion which he got from his ex-wife. Decided to produce a certain novel, an idea which came from the same source. Determined that the novel was brilliant, by checking the opinion of a noted film critic. Selected a screenwriter and director, names he also got from the critic. Subject ended the trial period feeling confident and self-assured, a state which he induced by seeking out the reactions of influential persons at a fashionable cultural event."

M glowered. "Do you mean there wasn't even one of his own? Not one opinion or desire?"

"No, all were derived from other people. I believe he even got the idea of selling his soul from the Gounod opera."

"Damnation!" roared M. "There are too many like him! They're ruining my business! I need some kind of consumer protection."

It's fraud, that's what it is—people trying to sell me borrowed merchandise. If I didn't check them out first, they'd bankrupt me." He sighed, in a shower of sparks. "Why are the ones without a soul of their own always the most eager to sell?"

John smiled wryly. "I'll have the incident erased from Wick's mind."

"What mind?" snarled M. "Just suppose I took people like that. Where's my profit? Where's my pleasure? Turn them into servants, procurers of other souls, and they'd feel right at home. No agony at all." His glance darted hotly over John's face. "Not like you, eh, Doctor?"

"No, not like me."

"Well," sighed M, "get back out into the field. And see if you can find me someone like you. Someone with a clear title to his property."

Something in the depths of John Faust's eyes glowed in pain for a moment. Then he closed his notebook and left the office wearily and sadly. ♡

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
 ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
 materofplcyzbdghjknqsvwx

From "A Matter of Policy" AHMM, April, 2005

—D. H. Reddall

The old sailor looked over at the action, then went back to his beer, as if somebody mashing the barkeep's face in the peanut bowl was a daily occurrence.

THE STORY THAT WON

The January/February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to John F. Dobbyn of Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; Tamera Huber of Prospect, Kentucky; Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida; John Thomen of Katy, Texas; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and Stuart R. Brynien of Brooklyn, New York.



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LEST WE FORGET—THE TOWER OF CLOCKS

ROBERT KESLING

The weasel-faced man furtively sidled up to my corner table. "You haf business here in Sligo?" he asked.

"War correspondent," I answered.

"Yess. Then you doubtless wonder about our Tower of Clocks in the plaza?"

"Well . . . yes," I admitted. "Each one shows a different time."

"It iss a long story." The man coughed softly, pointing to his throat.

I took the hint and signaled the bartender, "Another *zlivovitz* for my friend." My informant downed the strong local whiskey in one gulp. "Now," I reminded him, "your story."

"That Tower of Clocks I put up mineself last week after the invading Vulgars were driffen out by our brave troops. Each clock belonged to one of the prisoners tortured and shot by the Vulgars, set to the time of his execution."

What a story! "Bartender! Another *zlivovitz* for my friend!"

The man continued, "But not one of them revealed locations of our ammunition supplies! . . . Brave men, every one . . . Lest we forget! . . . Already I talk too much. F-f-forget whatever I say . . . See you tomorrow when I'm s-s-sober." He arose unsteadily, tottered out the door, and disappeared into the evening mist.

The bartender leaned forward and confided, "He will not meet you tomorrow . . . *Nor ever.*"

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because Vulgars executed prisoners secretly, avoiding public uprisings—as we of the underground learned. *Only the real traitor could have known the exact execution times!* He will disappear tonight. However, we keep his Tower of Clocks—lest we forget."

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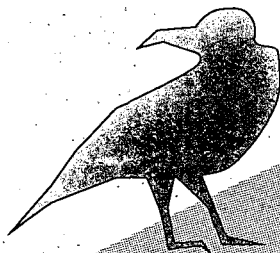
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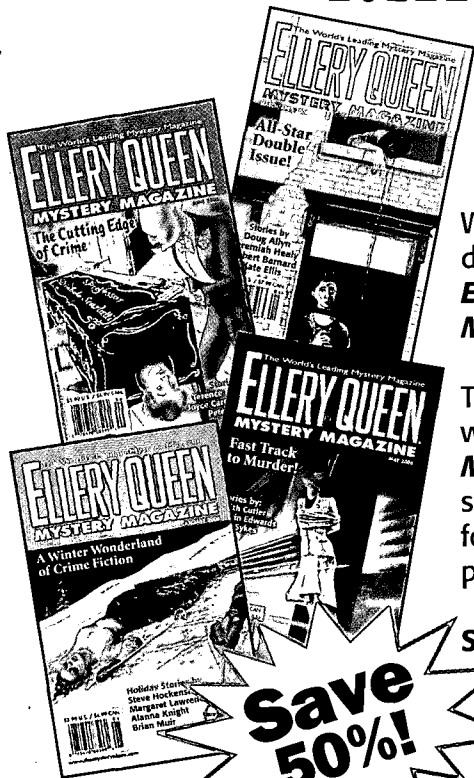
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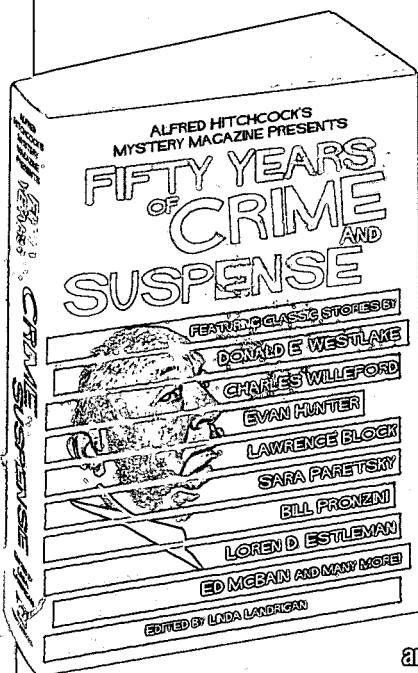
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FROM ED MCBAIN TO SARA PARETSKY: A 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF MYSTERY MASTERWORKS



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